

Understanding Ukraine and Belarus: The Beginning

Written by David R. Marples

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DAVID R. MARPLES, MAY 24 2020

This is an excerpt from *Understanding Ukraine and Belarus: A Memoir* by David R. Marples. Download your free copy on E-International Relations.

This is a memoir of my academic rather than personal life though inevitably the two overlap frequently. I was born on October 17, 1952, in Chesterfield, Derbyshire, but resided six miles to the east in the coal mining town of Bolsover. My parents were both from the same area: my father was a chemist at the local Coalite and Chemical factory in the valley of the Doe Lea River. My mother was a nurse and eventually became the local Health Visitor, monitoring families with newborn babies and small children. The main cities within proximity were Sheffield, 24 kilometers (15 miles) to the north, and Nottingham, about 32 kilometers (20 miles) to the south. Outside the mining communities, the countryside was the idyllic Peak District where I spent many hours hiking with my father and friends during my school years.

I have two younger sisters, Jill and Enid, and we were raised as Methodists. My mother's brother Jim Stringfellow was a Methodist minister, as was his uncle, Arthur Middleton. My earliest recollections are of Sunday church services and anniversaries at the Hill Top Methodist Church in Bolsover, though I have always lived a secular sort of life free of the teachings of John Wesley, who left his imprint in locations as far afield as Canada, China, the United States, and Africa. Both my grandfathers were coal miners and their careers left a lasting impression on me.

England in the early 1950s was in miserable shape though we had nothing with which to compare it. The war had ravaged the economy, hitting the mining communities especially hard. An ageing and weary Winston Churchill was Prime Minister, serving his final term in office. Many people, especially in industrial areas, lived in row houses without central heating or inside toilets. During the decade, the construction company Wimpey built an entire estate of houses on the hill across the road from Bolsover Castle, an eyesore on an otherwise picturesque landscape, but the home of perhaps half of the 11,000 population. Besides the coal mine, the main employer was Coalite and Chemical Company noted above, which moved its main headquarters to Bolsover in 1952. The stench of chemicals from the valley was a permanent feature of my early life and permeated my father's clothing.

At the age of 11, I attended Shirebrook Grammar School, not far from the town of Mansfield, and divided into a lower and upper school. Pupils wore maroon blazers and grey trousers or skirts and the regime was quite strict. The headmaster was a man called B.H.S. Smith and classes were divided according to his initials, though H was made up of those who had performed best in the so-called 11-Plus exams that all were obligated to take in the final year of elementary school. Within a year, the school had turned comprehensive, thanks to a decision by the new Labour government. The change was dramatic and chaotic. The new arrivals, mostly from the Derbyshire villages of New Houghton (usually pronounced as Uffan) and Stony Houghton, were unruly, wild, and not interested in study. It was my first acquaintance with class differences.

The new head, Geoff Cooksey, was a keen supporter of the comprehensive system. He insisted that everyone call him "Geoff," which itself ran contrary to the more formal addresses of "Mister" or "Miss," and he would personally greet us and remember pupils' names. Most of the staff remained after the transition though it was evident some had difficulties dealing with the Houghton pupils, who were regularly thrown out of classes for fighting, and not seldom with the teachers themselves.

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As everyone seemed to be very proficient at football (soccer) – I had been in the team at Bolsover elementary school – I took up running and became a member of the school's cross-country team. We would engage other schools in competition and sometimes they arrived from some distance away. That allowed for some subterfuge. Our route usually crossed the Derbyshire-Nottinghamshire border through the farming village of Sookholme, and surrounded by the slagheaps of the various coal mines in the Shirebrook area. A regular ploy was to allow one of our team to take the lead and coax the other team into following him up the slagheaps while the rest of us would take the first ten or so positions to win the race for our team.

I have reflected since that some of the teaching was blatantly racist, as were most of us, to some degree. In 1968, Enoch Powell had delivered his infamous "Rivers of Blood" speech, which offered the following comment about immigration from India, Pakistan, and the West Indies:

I have three children, all of them been through grammar school and two of them married now, with family. I shan't be satisfied till I have seen them all settled overseas. In this country in 15 or 20 years' time the black man will have the whip hand over the white man.

He reached the culmination point with the following:

It almost passes belief that at this moment 20 or 30 additional immigrant children are arriving from overseas in Wolverhampton alone every week – and that means 15 or 20 additional families a decade or two hence. Those whom the gods wish to destroy, they first make mad. We must be mad, literally mad, as a nation to be permitting the annual inflow of some 50,000 dependents, who are for the most part the material of the future growth of the immigrant-descended population. It is like watching a nation busily engaged in heaping up its own funeral pyre. So insane are we that we actually permit unmarried persons to immigrate for the purpose of founding a family with spouses and fiancés whom they have never seen.

The most inspirational teachers arrived in my more senior years, and two have to be singled out: Brian Silver for History and Tom Elkins for English and Literature. Silver was eccentric. He was very tall and bulky. He had a hearing aid, large glasses, and always wore two ties, each side with a different design. He based his classes on textbooks that we were supposed to read in full, but rarely did. We would often coax him to digress from his lecture into reminiscences of his days in Cambridge and various romances. His voice was like a megaphone but he was passionate about his subject.

Tom Elkins, a graduate of Queens University in Belfast – we always called him Tom – was in his late 20s and deeply interested in his pupils. He would organize trips to the theatre in Nottingham and to Stratford for Shakespeare plays. He was fascinated by W.B. Yeats, but also by the early modern English poet John Donne. Our chosen texts included L.P. Hartley's *The Go Between* and Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. We also read a lot of D.H. Lawrence, the closest thing to a local author since he had lived in Eastwood in the suburbs of Nottingham, and Tom took us to see the movie version of *Women in Love* starring Oliver Reed, Alan Bates, Glenda Jackson, and Jennie Linden. It was obvious to me that English Literature would be my main area of study. I wrote some poems as well as some prose, nothing of lasting quality.

I started reading Russian literature in translation – almost always the work of Constance Garnett (1861-1946), *née* Black, who started learning Russian at the age of 30, and then made a career of translating 19th century Russian novelists. Dostoyevsky was my favorite, and I waded through his entire collection but without much understanding of the world in which he lived. The books came in bright red covers and hardback editions and were available from the tiny Bolsover Library.

Thus far, I had never set foot out of the United Kingdom. In the summer of 1970, however, I was a member of a group selected by the Geography teacher Ted Grey to take part in an expedition to Arctic Norway for six weeks. It involved several teachers covering topics such as Art, Science, and Biology as well as the various fields of Geography. The students involved were aged 15 to 18, and we shared tents divided on the basis of gender. We began with a horrendous boat trip from Newcastle to Bergen, on which most of us became violently sick. The camp was close to

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the village of Sulitjelma on the border between Norway and Sweden and sufficiently remote from the nearest sizeable settlement of Bodo on the northwest coast of Norway. I kept a diary of the trip at the request of Grey, and several of us also formed a musical band, though the only real musician among us was John Walters, who later, briefly, formed his own band "Landscape" and became jazz critic for *The Guardian*.

In 1971, I started my university career at Keele University, near Stoke-on-Trent, a radical environment – Marxists, Leninists, and Trotskyists dominated the Student Union – and often perceived as an alternative to the elite sites of Oxford and Cambridge and the red-brick universities such as Bristol and Sheffield. My chosen areas of study were English and Sociology, though the entire first year was devoted to what was termed foundation courses, which could cover virtually anything. And life was about music, drugs, and religion. In my residence block we had all three in almost equal measure. My neighbor Jeff Kavanagh, from Hastings, was my first university friend, but soon began to cut classes and spend his days in a haze of marijuana smoke or on an LSD trip. Another friend, Robin Ware from London, was a rapid convert of the campus Christian Society and retained his faith. And to some extent we were all exploring music, buying LPs at stores in Hanley to hear on our primitive record players.

I stayed barely a year at Keele before moving to Westfield College, University of London to be with my fiancée, Kathryn Yates, who was studying Spanish. It proved easier to register there for History than English – I had good A-levels in English and History – and thus for selfish and personal reasons I embarked on my career as an historian as a means to an end, without any idea that it would become a permanent career.

The College – sadly, it no longer exists – was located in Hampstead, with departments based on old houses along Kidderpore Avenue and the bustling Finchley Road. The famous Heath was at the top of a long hill, and along the route was the ornate and charming Golders Hill Park, leading to Golders Green. The Department of History had superb scholars, mainly focused on medieval England. Lectures were few with ample time for library work, language study, and writing essays – two per week throughout my entire three years of study.

In the second year, having taken special subjects in the Revolt of the Netherlands and Nazi Germany at University College and Queen Mary College, I ran out of courses and started to look outside the general fields to Russia and the Soviet Union, which had become something of an obsession. Though no open courses were available at that time, Professor Martin McCauley at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies kindly agreed to set and mark essays, adding detailed comments and suggestions for further reading.

Finally, in the third year I enrolled for a course with a legendary professor, G.H.N. (Hugh) Seton-Watson, author of the magisterial *The Russian Empire, 1801-1917*, published in 1967. Though only in his late 50s at that time, he seemed much older, inspirational but fussy and irritable. He was so reluctant to answer student questions after his lecture that he would don his hat and coat while still speaking and exit the door while delivering his final sentence. If a student lit a cigarette, which was not unusual in the 1970s, he would clutch his throat coughing and spluttering "Put that thing out!"

London, it should be added, was a seething political hotbed. Britain had just entered what was then termed the Common Market, a miners' strike was causing mayhem for the Conservative government of Edward Heath, and a three-day work week had been implemented. Left-wing bookstores abounded, some of them quite mainstream. I spent many hours in Collet's Russian Bookstore on Charing Cross Road, immersing myself in books of Lenin, Trotsky, and others. In truth, the Soviet Union was an illusion that took me some time to dispel. One could buy copies of the KGB propaganda organ *New Times* on Oxford Street and read about the latest peace proposals of the Brezhnev leadership. Still, the legacy of the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 was still a memory for many, and probably contributed to the popularity of Trotsky in some circles, equally as naively.

At the same time the far-right National Front was holding rallies, not only in central London, but also at my College, where one of its leading figures, Richard Verrall, was studying the history of art. Verrall came to the residence one night bearing a copy of a pamphlet by "Richard Harwood" with the title "Did Six Million Really Die?" It was a scurrilous piece denying the Holocaust of the Jews of Europe, well written but with little by the way of corroboration to support his claims. At one point I stopped him and said: "That is obviously wrong. I don't agree with your point here."

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He looked bemused. "How did you know I had written it?". "I didn't," I replied. "But I do now."

He did not deny it. The pamphlet achieved some infamy for years afterward and was used by Holocaust deniers regularly. Two trials in Canada in 1985 and 1988 involved Ernst Zundel, the publisher of Verrall's pamphlet.

Politically, I moved further and further to the left, often as a reaction to the general sentiments expressed during hall of residence discussions. Verrall would initiate late-night discussions that often lasted into the early hours. On one occasion a Polish security guard was horrified to hear the Horst Wessel song come piping out of Verrall's room. One of my closest friends was Richard Rhodes, who like me was fascinated by Eastern Europe, though he was a medievalist who wished to pursue the subject of Bogomolism in 12th century Bulgaria as a future topic for a PhD. The two of us would become embroiled in arguments with Verrall though from different perspectives since Rhodes was no radical.

As I approached graduation, I had already decided to go further into what the British call "postgraduate" studies. I secured a position at the London School of Economics with a renowned scholar named James Joll, who encouraged me to make a study of the life of Sir William Tyrell, the private secretary of Sir Edward Grey, the influential Foreign Minister of the First World War period. I acquired a UK government grant to do so, but something held me back. Instead, I followed up a poster advertisement I had seen in one of the London colleges for Soviet studies at the Department of Economic and Social History, University of Sheffield. I attended an encouraging interview with Dr. Everett Jacobs, a Senior Lecturer at the initial stage of his career, aged 34, an American of Jewish background and a former student of Leonard Schapiro, another scholar with an enormous reputation. Jacobs was very enthusiastic about taking on a student.

But nothing was simple. I was breaking up with my long-time girlfriend Kathryn, with whom I had planned to live in Sheffield, and indeed did so for a brief, unhappy period after a rash decision to marry. Our engagement at the ages of 19 and 18 was foolishly premature though we had known each other already for 14 years and through two schools. It was a wretched period and for days at a time I got very little done.

Once in Sheffield, a city very familiar to me, I studied nothing other than languages, starting with intensive Russian. My tutor for the former at the University of Sheffield was the excellent Robert Russell. A local Latvian Jewish couple, Ruth and Leo Sobel – members of the city's Jewish community in which Everett socialized – helped me read some Soviet texts and would howl with laughter over tea and snacks at their small house, not far from the campus, at the absurdity of the analyses.

Other than Everett, there was little interest in the Soviet Union in the department. The emphasis was firmly on British labor history. The head of the department was a prominent scholar, Sidney Pollard (1925-1998), a descendant of Galician Jews who authored numerous books examining economic management in the process of industrialization. He and Everett were close friends but otherwise he seemed a remote figure, often absent on travels to give talks or for research.

During this early period, Everett and I talked at length about possible thesis topics. I was interested in Stalin's collectivization campaign of the late 1920s and early 1930s. His thesis, however, had examined the early postwar years in "Right-Bank Moldova," the region formerly known as Bessarabia, annexed by the USSR from Romania in 1940. He suggested that I choose a non-Russian region because over the coming years there would be an excess of PhDs in the area of Russian history. While studying the situation in Moldova, he had seen a number of reports on neighboring Ukraine, the western regions of which were not collectivized fully until the early 1950s. It would mean a lot of language work, but, in his view, Ukraine would be the better path career-wise.

I cannot recall how long it took me to follow his advice, but it proved to be accurate and determined my path for the coming decades. The Visiting Professor in the Russian Department that year was from Kyiv and agreed promptly to assist me in learning Ukrainian, though never in such a systematic fashion as my Russian classes.

Everett encouraged me to apply for a British Council grant to spend a year in the Soviet Union, and I attended an

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intensive interview in London and was duly selected, along with five others. I had listed my topic as 'Soviet collectivization of Western Ukraine, 1939-1953,' which I intended to begin once the language training was over. The Soviet side rejected my application even though they accepted all five others. The rejection did not come directly. They simply added a nuclear physicist to their own exchange list, knowing that the British would feel bound to reject their student. In turn, they removed me from the British list. It seemed I had chosen the most sensitive topic imaginable.

Suddenly, I was transformed from a student with a clear future path to one in disarray, my task seemingly impossible since I could not access Soviet archives or visit the Soviet Union. I spent a month at the British Library and read through secondary sources. I went to local Ukrainian clubs to meet with people who had left the Soviet Union during or shortly after the Second World War. In London, I met by chance the visiting Iwan S. Koropecyk, an economist from Temple University in Philadelphia, who encouraged me to access resources in the United States, since my path to the Soviet Union was blocked. After two years, I had done very little other than language work and background reading. I felt that the only way forward was to explore what I could outside the UK.

While in London, I stayed a few days in the Liverpool Street area at the home of Raphael Samuel, having been invited there by a fellow PhD student at Sheffield from Japan. Samuel lived in a Victorian house with one room at each level and on five levels with the lowest, the dining room, below ground. He was a bohemian character who shared rooms with his daughter and, occasionally with his ex-wife. He was famous for founding the journal *Past and Present*, and the creation of the History Workshop on British social history. In the dining room/kitchen, a sign on the wall announced "the declaration of children's rights" in the tyrannical world of parents. Dinners were feasts with the family. On one occasion, the roast beef for Sunday was left on the table on Saturday evening, and removed by the cat to the floor by the next morning. Samuel simply washed it and put it back. He was nocturnal and sat in his study most of the time pounding his typewriter, clad in denims, with long black hair and bare feet, chain smoking as he typed. He was one of the kindest people I ever met.

With generous support from my home county of Derbyshire, I secured a grant to spend four months in the United States, from January to the end of April 1978. I was to be based in Washington, DC, but first stayed for several days at the home of Koropecyk in Moorestown, New Jersey. Through him, I contacted other Ukrainians in the Washington area. One of them, Yaroslav (Yaro) Bihun, met me at the Trailways bus station in Washington, DC, a fairly dangerous place, as he explained. After several temporary abodes, the local Ukrainians found someone working at the Library of Congress who would rent out his basement for the time period I needed. His name was Paul Vidal, a native German and translator for Congressmen and Senators, who responded to requests for citations used in their speeches.

I greatly respected and admired Paul, who was a polyglot – in addition to French, English, and German, he knew Chinese and several other languages – and had a host of war-related stories that were simply engrossing. Though anti-Nazi he had been arrested by Soviet authorities in an East European forest and sentenced to death as an alleged German spy. He escaped and was eventually picked up by British forces. Paul was somewhat older than his wife. He would rise around 4:30 am and was falling asleep by 8 pm, after listening to Walter Cronkite deliver the news. We would drive in a carpool to the library, whereupon I would order materials. Initially, the responses to my requests were entertaining. I once received a book of birds rather than the intended Soviet source.

My path was eased by the young librarian of Slavic resources, Jurij Dobczansky, who took me directly to the stacks, after which I was allowed to wander down there alone to find materials. Jurij and his wife Olenka became good friends. I also met several scholars of Ukrainian background, including Zenon Kohut at the Library, all of whom were enthusiastic and encouraging about my choice of topic, though at times the task seemed well-nigh hopeless. My reading of the language was improving, constantly, but in terms of accessing valuable materials progress was limited. Still, I had the Ukrainian community to help me and they embraced me warmly as a foreigner who wished to study their recent past, a rarity at that time.

After several weeks in Washington, I bought a Greyhound monthly pass for \$99 and decided to visit every major scholar I could find in North America who worked on 20th century Ukraine. I began in Newark, Delaware, with Yaroslav Bilinsky, author of *The Second Soviet Republic: Ukraine After World War II* (1964), and then moved

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northward via Chicago – with stops along the route – to Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota and on to Milwaukee, and Madison, Wisconsin. In Milwaukee, I met Kenneth Farmer, perhaps best known for his PhD thesis and future book (1992) *The Soviet Administrative Elite*. Next, I visited John A. Armstrong in Madison, who very generously devoted hours of his time to an unknown Englishman, even to the extent of lending me the notes he had used for writing his 1955 book, *Ukrainian Nationalism*, which went through several editions. At last, I seemed to be making some progress, at least in terms of examining the opponents of Soviet rule in the western regions of Ukraine.

After an endless trip from Wisconsin to Seattle on the west coast, I moved north to Canada, first of all Vancouver, then across the Rockies to Edmonton, where I had been invited by a professor of history, Ivan Lysiak-Rudnytsky, who had written that I could spend four nights (precisely) at his home. It was the first week of March, but not as cold as I had anticipated. Rudnytsky was a small and dignified man of 59 years with a well-defined East European accent. He spoke slowly and clearly. He introduced me to the shaggy haired John-Paul Himka, then around 29-years of age and a research associate at the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies (CIUS), which had opened two years earlier. Both treated me like a future colleague, and Rudnytsky made no secret of his desire that I should move from the UK to Edmonton, something for which I had no initial enthusiasm. The city seemed too remote and I knew no one there outside my new circle of friends.

At CIUS, I met the Director, Manoly R. Lupul, at a meeting together with Rudnytsky. Lupul lacked Rudnytsky's dry humor and relaxed personality and spoke hurriedly, in short sentences. In contrast to Rudnytsky, he was a Canadian-born Ukrainian from nearby Willingdon, Alberta. A Harvard-educated scholar, he was a professor in the Faculty of Education who knew little Ukrainian when he first took over the directorship. Rudnytsky, though the obvious choice for that position, preferred to remain Associate Director, and it was obvious that there was some tension between the two.

Lupul was unequivocal: "you will be our first PhD in Ukrainian history." In his mind, the move had already occurred. Still, the contrast between England, where I could find no center for Ukrainian studies, was notable. Here at last was an institute purely devoted to the study of Ukraine and Ukrainians in Canada. I decided to give the matter of moving there some thought, though I had little idea at that time what such a transfer would involve.

My last sojourn was in Boston (April 1978) where I visited the Ukrainian Research Institute at Harvard University (HURI) and made contact with Roman Koropecyk, the son of Iwan, who was enrolled in a PhD program there in Ukrainian literature. At HURI, I made the acquaintance of a number of scholars, including the librarian Edward Kasinec, Frank Sysyn, whose talk on the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) I attended, and Paul Robert Magocsi, then aged about 32, who had just published his PhD thesis on the *Origins of Subcarpathian Rus*. I must have been introduced to the HURI Director, Omeljan Pritsak, though I do not recall the occasion. Most evenings I was socializing in Boston with Roman and his friend Viktor Ostapchuk.

I returned to Washington for the final month of my visit, and then on to England where I was obliged to find myself some new lodgings in Sheffield. Everett was sympathetic toward the proposed migration but saw no reason why I needed to move permanently. In his view, I could always visit CIUS again. Meanwhile, Rudnytsky sent several follow-up letters. In the Department of History, he would secure me a teaching assistantship that would be enough to cover my expenses, I would have an office, etc. I applied for a visa and for acceptance in a new abode, both of which were successful. There followed an interview in Birmingham and a medical examination. In August, only three months after my trip to the US, I returned to Alberta, now formally registered as a graduate student in two universities.

About the author:

David R. Marples is a Research Analyst in the Contemporary Ukraine Program, Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies and Distinguished Professor of Russian and East European History at the University of Alberta. His books include *Understanding Ukraine and Belarus: A Memoir* (2020), *Ukraine in Conflict* (2017), *'Our Glorious Past'*:

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Lukashenka's Belarus and the Great Patriotic War (2014), Russia in the 20th Century: The Quest for Stability (2011), and Heroes and Villains: Creating National History in Contemporary Ukraine (2007).