

# Understanding Ukraine and Belarus: Advancing My Career

Written by David R. Marples

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DAVID R. MARPLES, JUL 21 2020

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

By 1989, I had started to teach some courses for the Department of History at the University of Alberta. As noted earlier, one of the Russian area specialists was Kenneth C. Taylor, who taught popular courses on Soviet military history. The others were Himka, who was appointed to the position formerly occupied by Rudnytsky in 1985, and offered courses on Ukraine, and Martin Katz, who taught Imperial Russia and specialized in Russian political thought of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. An opening there seemed unlikely, but I enjoyed the teaching and the break from editing. In 1990, Katz slipped on some ice near his home and evidently announced that he needed prolonged hospitalization. The chair of the department, David J. Hall, asked in some desperation if it was possible for me to assist, so I took over a very full class on Imperial Russia at the start of the term with no prior preparation. I decided not to panic and to write new lectures for each week. The class, in turn, was appreciative, and we had some amusing exchanges about the situation. Hall was very grateful. I began to think that a more permanent career as a professor might be possible. I had not considered, however, that my own university might be feasible and applied for a position at the University of Ottawa.

It was at virtually the same time that a position opened up at Alberta thanks to the sudden and enforced decision of Ken Taylor to take extended disability leave. I talked with Philip Lawson, a friend in the department who worked on British imperial history, and he advised me to apply at once. I had published two books and a third, entitled *Ukraine Under Perestroika* was in press with Macmillan. That gave me an unusual advantage over most applicants. Ironically, the years working as a research analyst in Germany paid dividends in the Canadian academic climate.

The University of Ottawa was bilingual. I was short-listed and informed that I would need to offer lectures in both French and English. Audience questions could be in both languages on both occasions. I had high school French (or in England, 'O' level French) and could read the language. In the month or so before the interview I worked assiduously with a tutor I had hired on a daily basis to brush up my conversation. Every morning, for three hours, we would go over basic phrases and discuss events. He also read through my proposed talk at Ottawa, which was on my thesis topic "La collectivization de la terre sous Staline."

In Edmonton, I gave a lecture to the department and was interviewed formally for the position. In Ottawa, I was hosted by Michael Behiels, a friendly and approachable man whose research was in the Canadian history, who gave me great encouragement. The talks went well, though the French one ran into one snag, which was that when I mentioned Machine-Tractor Stations and abbreviated them as MTS, some students were convulsed with laughter. Was my pronunciation so bad, I wondered? The equivalent acronym in French, a professor informed me afterward, signified "mutually transmittable diseases." I liked the location of University of Ottawa, with its central position and at the heart of the Canadian government district. My main concern was grading French-language papers written by Francophone students, which I felt would need to be content-focused rather than stylistic, whereas in English I could grade based on both.

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In short, I was offered both positions, but there were qualifications. Ottawa, first, offered me a tenure-track position at the level of Assistant Professor. Hall's letter, which was strategic, was for a position at the level of Associate Professor, but with a deadline of only two days to respond. In short, I had to make a quick decision. Alberta, given my domestic circumstances, was the logical choice. Also, I would not need to go through the tenure process or be concerned about preparing courses in French. It was not an easy choice, however, because the thought of living in the nation's capital had intrigued me.

Once I had chosen Alberta, my life seemed to have acquired some stability. The world, however, was less stable. It was the summer of 1991. One month after I started my new career, there was a putsch in Moscow and Gorbachev was under house arrest in Crimea. The media descended. What was going to happen? I made what in retrospect was an inadvisable comment and responded (on August 19) that the putsch "was bound to fail" because it lacked all the ingredients of success, such as popular support, detention of populist leaders such as Boris Yeltsin, and a failure to monopolize the media. Most of us were watching events on CNN, for example. Radio Liberty was broadcasting Yeltsin's speeches back to the Soviet Union. My interview was published on August 20 in the local newspaper, and the next day, the leaders of the ruling group were on the run or dead. A shaken Gorbachev was flown back to Moscow, his wife Raisa now white haired from the shock of the detention.

I also wrote an editorial, published in the *Edmonton Journal* on August 21, 1991, which was assigned the title "Kremlin Coup Sure to Fail." I began as follows:

...the forces that removed Gorbachev, specifically the KGB, the military, and the police, evidently did not foresee the consequences of their actions. While Gorbachev was detained before boarding a plane to Moscow on Aug. 19, Boris Yeltsin, the popular Russian president, was left free on the day of the coup, and has acted as a magnet for opposition forces. By calling for Gorbachev's return rather than trying to take control himself, Yeltsin has also accrued wide support internationally for his bold and uncompromising resistance.

Thus, Gorbachev survived, though not for long.

I had attended another conference in Kyiv in the summer, organized by the Green World association – later the Green Party – which was led by Shcherbak. The big fear among locals was that with all the dramatic changes taking place, Russian forces would invade Ukraine. There were even rumors that tanks were massing on the border. It was a time for speculation. Many Canadians I knew were very active in Kyiv, including Marta Dyczok, and Chrystia Freeland, as well as *The Ukrainian Weekly* reporter, Marta Kolomayets. Bohdan Krawchenko was also a frequent visitor. I am not sure, however, that any of them predicted the collapse of the Soviet Union by the end of the year. In this same summer, the US president George H.W. Bush had warned Ukrainians of the dangers of "suicidal nationalism" and the support of the United States, manifestly, was for embattled Soviet president Gorbachev rather than Yeltsin or the leaders of the national republics.

In November, I attended the conference of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies in Miami. At the banquet, the keynote speaker was Jerry Hough of Duke University, a well-known commentator on Soviet events. He informed the audience that Gorbachev, appearances aside, was quite secure. He was playing Yeltsin like a puppet. As for the possibility of republics such as Ukraine becoming independent, the very idea was nonsense. Ukraine, in such a scenario, would become another Yugoslavia and be embroiled in a bloody civil war should it leave the Soviet Union. The viewpoint was not untypical among American political scientists and helps to explain why so few people anticipated the collapse of Gorbachev's government. The most obvious and easily detectable fact – that he was very unpopular at home – was similar to the situation of Ukrainian leader Petro Poroshenko in 2019 – i.e. it was possible to be immensely popular abroad and detested at home. I would posit though that Gorbachev's demise was obvious to any of us who had studied the nationalities question and his feeble attempt to deal with it at the party conference of 1988, and subsequently in his attempts to revise the Union Agreement over the course of 1991.

During this traumatic political time, I returned belatedly to the notion of publishing my PhD thesis in some form. I decided the best option was as a collection of papers on the thesis and related topics. It was not evident in late 1991 that Soviet archives would soon be open and I felt that the thesis could in any case make a contribution to

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knowledge. I titled the new book *Stalinism in Ukraine in the 1940s*. It was a major departure from my earlier publications, which all focused on contemporary Ukraine, with Chernobyl as the subject of the first two, and a composite part of the third. It also seemed to me that the new monograph was more appropriate given my new career. It was published in 1992, once again with Macmillan Press in the UK and St. Martin's Press in New York.

I kept in contact with CIUS, which for some time permitted me the use of an office even though I was now spending most of my time in History, located across campus in the Henry Marshall Tory Building. There were changes there too. Krawchenko was clearly restless and anxious to spend more time in Ukraine. In 1991, he ended his tenure as Director. He had in mind the American scholar Frank Sysyn as his logical successor, but although the latter was keen to work for CIUS, he did not want to live in Edmonton. He suggested, in turn, the appointment of another American historian of 18<sup>th</sup> century Ukraine who had been working at the Library of Congress, Zenon Kohut. Sysyn would serve as Associate Director and be based at the CIUS office in Toronto. Once the arrangement was in place, the status quo was retained for a remarkably long time, until Kohut retired in 2012.

CIUS benefited from some exceptionally generous endowments, partly gathered as a result of the endeavors of Krawchenko, including \$1 million from Toronto businessman Petro Jacyk, subsequently doubled by the oil-rich Alberta provincial government, for a historical project to translate the works of Ukrainian historian Mykhailo Hrushevsky into English. Krawchenko told me that the project would take about five years, after which the funds could be used to develop studies in any field of Ukrainian history. In reality, it has lasted over 28 years. From 1992, I switched my attention to Belarus, initially to study questions related to Chernobyl. Compared to Ukraine, it was receiving very little international attention.

At the university, I was fortunate to advance quickly to the rank of full professor, largely thanks to my four books that had appeared by the time I applied. Since my teaching had received favorable reviews, the promotion was painless, and took effect from the summer of 1995. By then I had a growing number of graduate students, especially at the Master's level.

Among the invitations I accepted during this period was one from the Ditchley Foundation, held at Ditchley House near Oxford. It was held in January 1994 and the topic was "Russia's Search for a Post-Communist Identity." The guests included Grigory Yavlinsky, the leader of the Yabloko political party in Russia, along with a host of British aristocratic diplomats, including Sir Rodrick Braithwaite, former British Ambassador to Moscow, along with the current ambassador, Sir Roderick Lyne. It was an international gathering based on Chatham House rules, meaning that nothing said in the room left it. Thus, I shall not break that tradition here.

There was one incident worth recalling, however. One morning, I took a walk outside the majestic hall into the grounds, with lush green fields stretching endlessly to the horizon. I almost felt homesick. Striding toward me was Ambassador Lyne. Hardly pausing for conversation, he admonished me, finger waving: "Just think young man, if your people hadn't rebelled 200 years ago, all this would be yours." I tried to respond but was so taken aback by the comment that I was lost for words. Mistaking me for a Canadian would have been possible given that I was a delegate from Canada. Mistaking me for an American was unfathomable. And if I had been American, how would I have responded? "Well we didn't like your tea very much"?

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

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