

Teaching and Publishing in Cambridge and Moscow

Written by David R. Marples

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DAVID R. MARPLES, JUL 9 2020

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

Though I was focusing my research on Ukraine and Belarus, I never lost track of Russia. My mandate at the University of Alberta was to teach 20th century Russian history, which I did with a regular course and a seminar. My first PhD students all examined the same subject in different areas: David F. Duke studied the Russian environment, completing a PhD in 1998; Aileen Espiritu, discussed above, examined indigenous groups in western Siberia, graduating the following year; and Elena Krevsky's area of interest was the Silver Age in Russian literature. She completed her thesis in 2000. I was frequently in Moscow, at conferences or as a stopover to other cities. For a time, I pondered the idea of a project in Tatarstan using Kazan as a base and visited the university there to ascertain interest in another project. Ultimately, I did not pursue it because other plans took precedence.

I began to conceive of a general text on Russia, in which I could interject some ideas and new analysis, especially on the Second World War period. An editor from Pearson Education encouraged me to sign a contract and promised an advance. At the same time, I worked on a shorter project for Longman's Seminar Studies series, which focused on the Russian Revolution. The book appeared in 2000 under the title *Lenin's Revolution: Russia 1917-1921*, and sold very well worldwide but especially in the United Kingdom. The major project, which was much lengthier, appeared two years later as *Motherland: Russia in the Twentieth Century* in a bright red cover. It was also translated into Polish and republished by Ossolineum Publishers in Wroclaw as *Historia ZSRR* and featured in bookstores in Warsaw and other cities.

In October 2002, I was with a friend at a Moscow theatre watching an avant garde experimental play. Just a week later, about 50 armed Chechens seized the nearby Dubrovka theatre taking over 800 hostages in a standoff that ended when Russian security forces piped gas into the theatre. All the Chechens were killed but so were 170 theatre-goers. It was a sign of the terrorist threats still posed to Russia as a result of its brutal war in Chechnya. The gangsterism and chaos that characterized Moscow in the 1990s had ended but the new order brought more authority to the leadership and to the security forces. In turn, the attempts at resistance became more desperate and the general public was endangered.

In 2004, I published another book with Longman entitled *The Collapse of the Soviet Union 1985-1991*, which allowed me to advance some thoughts on a complex question that intrigued both scholars and my own students. It seemed to me that many Western sources exaggerated the impact of the arms race and Cold War in the demise of the USSR. For the final three years of its existence, the United States was trying as hard as any power to ensure stability and the survival of the Gorbachev regime. Further, the economic crisis, which was seen by many analysts as a decisive factor, was not as acute as the one I had witnessed in Russia in 1998. Yet the government had survived. My line was that the nationalities question and Glasnost were the decisive issues. The latter permitted national revival that allowed debates over questions defunct since the 1920s. Old animosities came to the fore, such as the war between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, and the Baltic States were allowed to lead the way to a new era, when old national flags and symbols could be resurrected, state languages restored, and independence soon on the horizon as a possibility. Gorbachev's policies created these conditions though he had no intention of dissolving the Union. And ultimately the clash between the Soviet Union and Russia, under the

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presidency of Yeltsin from June 1991, proved decisive.

In the year 2001, I was invited to speak at Cambridge to a Ukrainian Studies group formed by a PhD student, Alex Orlov from Kyiv. Most of the people I encountered in this initial visit were studying the sciences but they were anxious to have some focus on their native country. I had visited Cambridge frequently as a child because my family had relatives there, and I was happy to offer a talk on "Ukrainian Politics and the Future of the Kuchma Regime." Alex wanted more, however, and we had some discussions about how there could be a stronger focus on the country at Britain's leading university. Others such as Olesya Khromeychuk, who was working for a Ukrainian radio station based in London, and Cambridge students Zoryana Oliynyk, Andriy Nevidomsky, Andriy Ivanchenko, and Oksana Trushkevych also joined us in one of the nearby pubs.

The following year, I discussed the idea of an annual lecture on Ukraine at Cambridge, both with Zenon Kohut the CIUS Director, and with the Committee for Russian and East European Studies professors at Cambridge such as Simon Franklin, Hubertus Jahn, Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov, and David Lane. Zenon agreed to my request to use a small sum from a section I operated freelance at CIUS called the Stasiuk Program for the Study of Contemporary Ukraine. We would advance the sum of \$3,000 directly from Edmonton, which would be sufficient to get the series started. The longevity of the series would be dependent on its initial success. I suggested Roman Szporluk, the Mykhailo Hrushevsky Chair of Ukrainian Studies at Harvard University, as the first speaker. He was well known, a brilliant and witty lecturer, and likely to attract a good audience.

The first lecture took place in February 2003, with about 70 people in attendance at the large lecture theatre in Robinson College. The lecture, entitled "'Tabula Russia' or a Nation in its Own Right," cited a 1948 lecture by Lewis Namier on the centenary of the 1848 revolutions in Europe, which called for recognition of the "Ukrainian factor." Namier was born in the Ternopil region of Ukraine and concerned about the lack of recognition for Ukraine in his adopted country. The same sentiment was expressed by Simon Franklin. Ukrainian Studies was invisible at Cambridge. Three officials from the Ukrainian Embassy attended, and the talk was followed by a formal dinner at Emmanuel College hosted by Franklin. Several others had travelled from London.

With this successful beginning, Franklin, Jahn, Lane, and myself prepared for the following year. We had decided to alternate the speakers between Ukraine and the West, so after Szporluk, we asked the Ukrainian historian Yaroslav Hrytsak to deliver the 2004 version, followed by Dominique Arel of the University of Ottawa in 2005, and the Chernobyl scholar and author Alla Yaroshinskaya in 2006 for the 20th anniversary of the accident. The audiences varied between 70 and 100, which filled the Robinson Auditorium. The lectures were always followed by a wine and cheese social, and then a banquet in one of the Cambridge colleges for a smaller group of guests. Usually I requested that the lectures be timed to coincide with the February Reading Week at the University of Alberta in order to be able to attend.

Two years later a Ukrainian Studies program was launched at Cambridge on an experimental basis for two years. But it took place in controversial circumstances as Cambridge accepted a donation of more than 5 million pounds from the Ukrainian tycoon Dmytro Firtash, a controversial figure best known for his company RosUkrEnerg, which siphoned funds from Russian oil sales to Ukraine as an intermediary and in early 2020 was facing extradition to the United States for racketeering and money laundering. The acceptance of the gift from Firtash by Cambridge came under criticism both within the university and without. A group within the university thought that the contributor should have been better vetted, while analyst Taras Kuzio furiously denounced it in a number of articles published in the media.

Kuzio in 2008 was an outspoken supporter of Firtash's main political opponent Yulia Tymoshenko. Firtash allegedly played a role in her arrest by the Yanukovich presidency in 2011. He was also linked with Paul Manafort, the now disgraced former campaign director of US President Donald J. Trump, and believed to be financing several political leaders in Ukraine, including two former presidents Viktor Yushchenko and Viktor Yanukovich. The donation thus overshadowed the success of the original plan to create a Ukrainian program at Cambridge, and the selection of Rory Finin, an enterprising American scholar of Ukrainian literature, as the inaugural director. In 2013, when I delivered a talk on Belarus in Cambridge's Slavonic Studies series, followed by a dinner at Emmanuel College,

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Franklin proposed a toast to Firtash for his contributions to Cambridge. That was one occasion on which my glass was not emptied.

Still, the program, under Finnin's guidance from 2008 to 2018, has been enormously successful, and Cambridge now has the largest Ukrainian studies program in western Europe, something that I could only have dreamed of when commencing my PhD program at Sheffield. By 2018, according to a report in *The Ukrainian Weekly* (November 1, 2018), it had trained more than 300 students at undergraduate and graduate levels, and held over 100 public events. In that year, Rory Finnin took a sabbatical leave and was succeeded by Olenka Pevny, a specialist in early modern Slavic culture and history, formerly of the University of Richmond. The Firtash connection will begin to look more worrisome if he is convicted of the charges against him. At the time of writing he was still in Austria, and had not resided in Ukraine since the Maidan uprising of 2014.

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 20th Century: The Quest for Stability* (2011), and *Heroes and Villains: Creating National History in Contemporary Ukraine* (2007).