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EDITORIALS

PUTIN'S INVASION OF UKRAINE AND DISINTEGRATION OF STATES

As of February 24, 2022, the history of Eastern Europe and perhaps the world is changing like it did during the implosion of communism in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s. The fall of communism brought a major geopolitical realignment. It is too early to know what catastrophes Vladimir Putin's attempt to reverse that realignment will bring. After 1990 several of the countries of Eastern Europe faced fragmentation. During the decade of the 1990s, Yugoslavia broke up into seven states in an eruption of war which was replete with genocides. Two other countries also partitioned, but in contrast to Yugoslavia, they did so seemingly peacefully. Czech and Slovak Republics emerged out of Czechoslovakia in a peaceful partition. Much to the relief of an apprehensive population and the wider world, the largest country in the world, U.S.S.R. also dissolved in a seemingly orderly manner. Many were celebrating that the dissolution of these federal states brought a fulfillment of a longing for independence. Others experienced a loss of the advantages that a larger country provided. The implosion of communism was particularly liberating for religious people and communities as it promised a transition from persecution and repression to opportunities for renewal and restoration.

The process of disintegration is not instantaneous, but a process that may last many years. While at first the partition of the Soviet Union took place legally and peacefully, part of consensual processes, over time unrest and conflicts started leading to violence. There was military confrontation in Georgia, a war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, ethnic conflicts in Moldavia, massive demonstrations in Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Belarus, and others. A bloody years-long war took place in Chechnya and neighboring regions within the border of the Russian Federation. Russia annexed Crimea and supported a secessionist war in eastern Ukraine. Russian troops were involved either in putting down the revolts or allegedly playing the role of peacekeepers or protectors.

The former Soviet Bloc countries, including three former federal units of the USSR (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), knew from experience that Russia, both during Tsarism and Bolshevism, displayed distinct colonial impulses that brought great suffering to the occupied countries. Neighbor countries of the USSR remembered the many conflicts by which the USSR

occupied parts of Finland, Poland, Hungary, and Romania. They had good reasons to fear that such impulses were not lost in the post-communist time as rulers may emerge with designs to recoup the losses. These countries decided to protect themselves by joining NATO. Regardless of whether NATO welcomed their membership or not—the governments of these sovereign countries aspired, and in most cases, succeeded in becoming members of NATO (and EU), thereby feeling the collective protection that NATO provided from a would-be aggressor. Not all of them were accepted, despite their aspirations, as not all preconditions for membership were yet met. In some cases, it was also due to the Russian government's objection, which played a role in delaying membership in NATO. This was the case with Ukraine, the largest European country, and in many ways both closest to Russia and most imperiled by Great Russian imperialism.

Russia and Ukraine have a joint origin in Kievan Rus', which accepted Christianity in its Orthodox version, under the grand prince in 988 A.D. whom the Russians call Vladimir and the Ukrainians Volodymyr. While both of these sizeable Slavic peoples shared a long history in a single country and generally enjoyed what is usually called a "brotherly" relationship, not all of them considered themselves to be one nation. Regardless of whether they had the same or different perceptions of their identity, it seemed until the year 2022 that they could coexist peacefully (remember the old Soviet slogan about peaceful coexistence) even though the Ukrainians showed unmistakable preferences to be more Western oriented, more pro-European than the Russians. Nor is that an entirely post-Communist phenomenon. Ukrainian lands, particularly the part that Ukrainians call Right Bank (of the Dnieper River) had lived under different state structures than the Russian Empire, such as the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and later the Hapsburg Monarchy and had adapted themselves to Western cultural and religious influences. In some cases, but not a majority by a long shot, it even led to the creation of an Eastern Rite Ukrainian Greco-Catholic Church (often called Uniates).

Opposed to the prevalent desire by citizens of Ukraine, (not just ethnic Ukrainians but many Russian ethnics) to be independent, stands the autocratic, ruler-for-life of Russia, Vladimir Putin, supported by an unclear number of Russians, who espouses a revisionist history of the Russian state and is vigorously promoting a concept he calls "*Russkiy mir*" (Russian world). This concept, which has the support of Kirill, the Patriarch of Moscow and all of Russia,¹ claims that

¹ The late Rev. Leonid Kishkovsky, the ecumenical officer of the Orthodox Church in America had frequently travelled to Moscow on official visits. During those visits he was always received by the Moscow patriarchs. Having gone to

all Russians (by their definition—including Ukrainians and Belarus) wherever they should live in a single Russian country. As many ethnic Russians do live in diaspora, that could mean that the land on which they live should become united with their “motherland.” Whether he consciously patterned his plans after Hitler’s initial attempt to bring all German speaking people into the same Reich or not, the parallels are there for all to see. Putin has now undertaken to implement this doctrine with a single swoop this January and February by organizing war games that de facto annexes Belarus and begun an invasion aiming to bring all of Ukraine under his control. The success of this invasion involving well more than 100,000 Russian soldiers is not yet known at the time of the writing of this editorial. The aim of this editorial is to condemn this brutal invasion in moral terms as an act of evil commanded by an evil man. The choice of the subtitle of this editorial as Putin’s Invasion of Ukraine rather than Russian Invasion of Ukraine is meant to distance ourselves from the notion of collective guilt. Only some Russians are co-responsible for this military attack. Most Russians had no say in the decision and probably were as surprised as Ukrainians and the rest of the world when they learned that Russian military forces crossed into Ukraine. While we cannot predict the future, we can only wish that Putin’s imperial designs finish similarly to Hitler’s—without the total ruin of the country which he rules and without provoking another world war.

What Has All This to do with Religion?

That question is a topic exceeding that scope of this editorial, but from all the available news, all religious communities of Ukraine, non-Christian and Christian, even including a statement by Metropolitan Onufriy, of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church under the canonical rule of the Moscow Patriarch, have called for the defense of Ukrainian independence. Photographs show older and younger Ukrainians going out to the streets without weapons and chanting to Russian soldiers, “Go home—this is Ukraine.” I am not aware of a strong pacifist tradition among citizens of Ukraine, but many are responding with non-violent direct action opposing the mighty war machine under the command of a man who does not recognize their identity. The UN Genocide Convention of 1948 defines *the intention* to eradicate an ethnic, religious, cultural, or racial group

Moscow upon the enthronement of Patriarch Kirill in 2009 Fr. Leonid, who was known for his temperate assessments of developments in Russia, reported in dismay that Russia has become a clero-fascist state.

as genocide, thus Putin's public declaration that Ukrainians are Russians is in itself a genocidal aim, even if his army ultimately does not succeed in occupying the land.

Even religious people who are willing to follow non-violent teachings of their religious leaders, must not fail to be on the side of the victims, whether they do so by non-violent or even violent means—following their conscience. Very likely the role religious leaders did play in this aggression will become known. Our advisory editor, Mark Elliott, wrote an article devoted to some aspects of the role of religion in this war and we expect that numerous other analyses will follow.

How will OPREE Respond?

OPREE will remain consistent to its founding mission. The journal is multidisciplinary, multi-religious, and ecumenical, aiming to promote dialogue, respect, and peace among people of various worldviews. Since our beginning in 1971, we have endeavored to provide truthful analyses and reports about contemporary and historical religious phenomena on the territories of former socialist countries of the USSR and other socialist countries of Europe. The editors do not expect to agree with everything every author writes but we aim to responsibly avoid publishing views that we believe purposively warp the truth. OPREE does not provide news coverage but publishes serious analyses of present and past religious developments. Only on request by authors some articles will be peer-reviewed; others will be evaluated by the editors.

Several times in the past (e. g. after the collapse of communism in Europe) we thought we may have achieved our purpose and should terminate our activity. But other challenges appeared, such as the re-emergence of ethnoreligiosity that led to ugly conflicts and wars, such as in the former Yugoslavia. Our authors aimed to analyze these trends and we sought to promote peacemaking in these lands. As most of the countries of Eastern Europe aimed to grow democracy, we were glad to feature some of the successes of religious communities in being of service in their societies. The most prominent example in this respect were scholars from Ukraine. A disproportionately large number of their scholars sent in manuscripts describing and evaluating the developments of religion during the period of their independence. They were also eager to explore their past as the archives of the Soviet period opened to scholars and they could document rather than merely generalize or depend on anecdotal evidence about what transpired since the Bolshevik revolution. I interpreted their eagerness to publish their materials in OPREE as a desire to have their work made available in the English language to a much larger, world-wide readership.

At the same time, some of our authors were alarmed by restrictions being imposed on religious activities in Russia and other former Soviet states, after an initial, hopeful expansion of religious liberties. An unexpected benefit is that OPREE now contains articles about institutions or events that have been destroyed by Russian military actions (e.g., “Historical Memory of Ukrainian Adventists in the Context of Museum Work in Ukraine” by Valentyna Kuryliak and Lyudmyla Kruglova in Vol. XLI, No. 4, pp. 321-336, containing photos of museum items which are now lost because the Russian military bombed the museum.) As of this issue we do not know whether any of the authors perished but we know that many were internally displaced or became refugees.

It is an open question what the future will bring. We are in communication with our advisory editors from both countries as well as additional scholars from Ukraine. We received some anguished pleas for peace from both Ukraine and Russia. I plan to communicate with those with whom we are in touch for as long as the communication lines are not completely interrupted. And we’ll be even more willing to share the fruits of their work with the wider world. The same courtesy is extended to scholars from Russia or any other country. We’ll help them with our editorial volunteers to make the text as clear as possible in English, a language not their own. We may develop forms of cooperation with journals from other countries whose editors think such cooperation may be beneficial to them. OPREE continues to be a journal based entirely on a labor of love, hence scholars need not be concerned that fees will be required of them to have their work published. Because of the urgency and timeliness of publicizing these works, under conditions where our communication with the authors may be difficult or impossible, there may be times when we may not be able to do the careful copy-editing to which we normally aspire.

In sum, we are reaffirming that our initial reason for starting OPREE continues for now and, hopefully, into the future.

Paul Mojzes, editor-in-chief