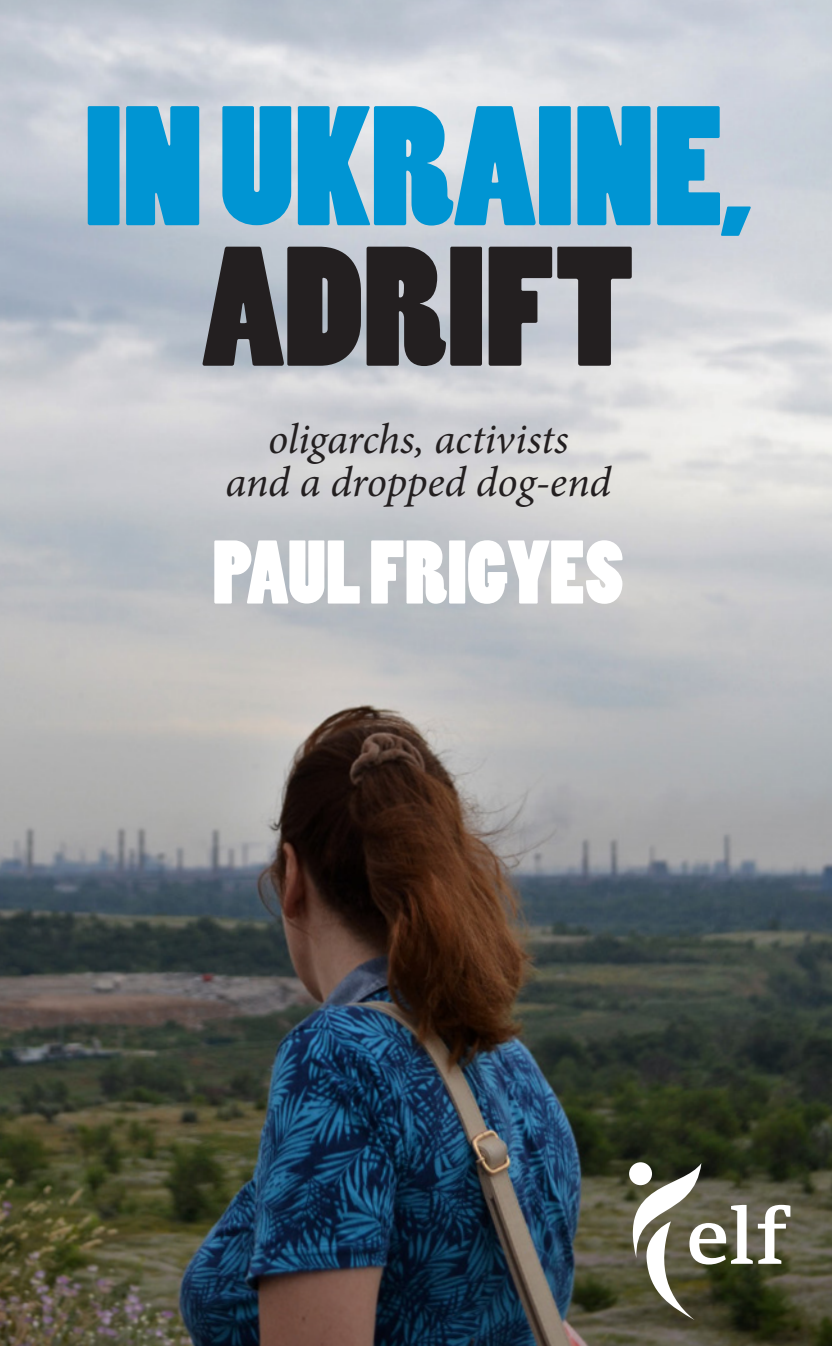
IN UKRAINE, ADRIFT

oligarchs, activists and a dropped dog-end

PAUL FRIGYES



elf


BELARUS
POLAND
RUSSIA
Chernobyl
Kyiv
Lviv
Kharkiv
Uzhhorod
Poltava
UKRAINE
Dnipro
Luhansk
Donbass
Donetsk
Kryvyi Rih
Zaporizhzhia
MOLDOVA
ROMANIA
Mariupol
Odessa
Sea of Azov
Crimea
Simferopol
Sevastopol
Black Sea
Territory controlled by Russia-backed separatists, August 2021
Territory annexed by Russia since March 2014

IN UKRAINE, ADRIFT

PUBLISHER
European Liberal Forum
Rue d'Idalie 11-13, boite 6
1050 Ixelles, Brussels
+32 (0)2 669 13 18
info@liberalforum.eu
www.liberalforum.eu

IN UKRAINE, ADRIFT

oligarchs, activists and a dropped dog-end

PAUL FRIGYES

elf

SILC SWEDISH INTERNATIONAL LIBERAL CENTRE

Published by the European Liberal Forum in cooperation with the Swedish International Liberal Centre. Co-funded by the European Parliament.

The European Liberal Forum (ELF) is the official political foundation of the European Liberal Party, the ALDE Party. Together with 46 member organisations, we work all over Europe to bring new ideas into the political debate, to provide a platform for discussion, and to empower citizens to make their voices heard. ELF was founded in 2007 to strengthen the liberal and democratic movement in Europe. Our work is guided by liberal ideals and a belief in the principle of freedom. We stand for a future-oriented Europe that offers opportunities for every citizen. ELF is engaged on all political levels, from the local to the European. We bring together a diverse network of national foundations, think tanks and other experts. At the same time, we are also close to, but independent from, the ALDE Party and other liberal actors in Europe. In this role, our forum serves as a space for an open and informed exchange of views between a wide range of different actors.

Swedish International Liberal Centre (SILC) is a liberal foundation promoting democracy. Our aim is to strengthen organizations and individuals in their struggle for democracy and human rights. We support activists and parties in totalitarian and post-totalitarian societies, especially in Eastern Europe, North Africa and Latin America.

Cover photograph: Anna Ambrosova, environmental activist in Kryvyi Rih at the Pyvdenni No 3 open-cast mine with the city's steel plants in the background.

Paul Frigyes is an author and journalist and the Swedish original *I Ukraina på drift* was his third book for SILC. In Ukraine, Adrift is the first of his books that has been translated to English and it has also previously been translated into Ukrainian. He first visited Ukraine in 2002.

Per Olsson works as a programme officer at SILC. He has previously worked with democracy support projects in Ukraine and has a deep affection for the country.

Graphic design: Martin Larsson
Translation from Swedish: Neil Betteridge
Editor: Per Olsson
Photography, cover: Paul Frigyes
Print: Nørhaven A/S, Denmark 2021
ISBN: 978-2-39067-012-4

Table of contents

IN UKRAINE, ADRIFT
is also available as an audiobook.

Stream it for free at:

https://soundcloud.com/europeanliberalforum/sets/audiobook-in-ukraine-adrift

FOREWORD

Ukraine: The making of a liberal democracy

In Ukraine, Adrift: Oligarchs, Activists and a Dropped Dog-End by Paul Frigyes was originally published in 2020 in Stockholm. The English translation is meant to make this book accessible to the broader readership. While the author delves into the depth and paradoxes of Ukraine's history and society, the relevance of this reading goes beyond discovering the peculiarities of a single country. Without even directly talking about it, this book presents a source of profound insights concerning European political history and the history and theory of liberalism.

First and foremost, this thoughtful and well-written book is of great value to anyone interested in the vast, complex, and one-of-a-kind country located at the very heart of wider Europe. Ukraine, despite its persistent presence in international news, to a large extent remains a mystery to foreigners and immediate neighbours. At times, it appears a mystery even to Ukrainians themselves. As a result of abrupt historical turnarounds, sharp regional disparities, and conflicting internal tendencies, its development does not follow

any recognisable pattern but unfolds according to its own logic. This dynamic is not easy to grasp and seems impossible to predict. The only way to understand this 'mystery' is to dive into the multiplicity of factors that shape Ukrainian society, its ambitions and struggles, and, as a result, its international performance. The author of this book has masterfully accomplished this uneasy task.

In Ukraine, Adrift is a very engaging and insightful read that accurately grasps the current state of affairs in the country. Written by a Swede, this monograph resembles those enlightening travel notes produced by curious Westerners travelling across the Russian Empire up until the twentieth century and who were constantly surprised by ubiquitous entanglements of the familiar Western culture with bizarre Eastern ways. Through myriads of anecdotes collected while travelling across Ukraine's regions, Paul Frigyes brings up sharp observations about the multi-layered society full of paradoxes and inconsistencies. The author also diligently traces the roots of the country's complex history, identity, and society shaped under the influence of various and often conflicting factors. Issues such as social and family relations, remote and more recent history, political tensions, and corruption are wittily presented through descriptions of Ukraine's cities, towns, and regions which can be considered representative or particularly prominent for each of these phenomena.

Overall, the book's structure makes up a patchwork of narratives and topics jumping from one epoch in one chapter to another in the next, switching from eastern to western parts of the country, without following any chronological or geographical sequence, without

any justification of the author's choice of topics. Surprisingly, this organic, intuitive approach seems the most – if not the only – adequate way to deconstruct, put back together, and then make sense of all the seemingly unrelated socio-cultural, historical, political, and economic undercurrents that are dynamically shaping Ukraine's evolution as an independent country. This is exactly what makes up the book's biggest strength and its most precious contribution to the attempts to explain and understand Ukraine.

However, leaving aside all the culturological curiosity, why should we care enough to make an effort to understand this country and society with all their convoluted twists and turns? This question is rather rhetorical. The most recent history alone has demonstrated that internal developments within the country hide enormous potential to provoke a domino effect of a much more global scope than anyone would initially anticipate. Such a lack of anticipation stems from the lack of understanding: of the geostrategic significance of Ukraine as a country, but also of the ways in which socio-cultural trends and shifts within it determine how it acts internationally. As Zbigniew Brzezinski has argued in his famous *Grand Chessboard*, Ukraine's very location makes it a 'geostrategic pivot'. Through its emergence/existence as an independent entity, it has unwillingly become – and will certainly remain – a significant (f)actor on the international political arena. For this very reason, Ukraine is not just one of the EU Eastern Partnership countries and cannot be seen and approached in just the same way, however comforting this idea might feel on both sides of the EU-Ukraine relations. While all countries in the region are unique and troubled in their own ways, what

makes Ukraine stand apart is the scale of its geopolitical significance. In this particular case, overlooking the country's internal evolution is not a sign of efficiency but rather of short-sightedness and ever carelessness.

Paul Frigyes' observations as well as the opinions of Ukrainian experts broadly referred to in each of the chapters shed light on the driving forces behind the choices and attitudes of Ukrainians: from overthrowing Viktor Yanukovych to electing Volodymyr Zelenskiy, from opposing gender equality to seeking European values, from idealising to despising. At the end of the day, it is in fact the spontaneous, emotional, almost romantic character of its people that makes up the Ukrainian political system, reform agenda, and foreign policy decisions. Emotional input and practical output are truly inseparable here. Failing to see this link and take it into account while cooperating with Ukraine inevitably results in fruitless negotiations, stagnation, and frustration on both parts. The substantial common interest gets lost in translation among unclarified – and thus often broken – mutual expectations. Average Ukrainians failed to fight against petty everyday corruption but were ready to freeze to death and sacrifice their very lives on the Maidan Square demanding the right to move towards Europe and everything that it symbolically represents to them. Such paradoxes are incomprehensible from a rational point of view yet deeply rooted in the Ukrainian national character and are thus not likely to change or disappear any time soon. In this regard, Frigyes' thoughtful book makes these psychological and behavioural paradoxes look a little less paradoxical.

It is key to understand that the emotional driving force behind the Ukrainian national idea is a search

for freedom. While it has always been the cross-cutting theme of the national literature and folk culture, today this motif is as vivid as ever before. Today, freedom is symbolically embodied by the West, or rather the idea of the West. It is inseparably entangled with a dream of prosperity, stability, modernity – the benefits of the Western world that Ukrainians have always sought but hardly ever enjoyed. But with freedom comes responsibility, which implies and requires maturity. And here is where the Ukrainian state and society get stuck.

Despite its old history, as an independent political entity Ukraine is young – and so is its political system, civil society, and societal norms. What has taken other nations several centuries, suddenly independent and largely unprepared Ukrainians need to accomplish in a few decades. After having finally gotten all its historically divided territories back together, Ukraine is now faced with the dramatic lack of political experience to govern these, left alone to defend its internally divergent interests vis-à-vis its mighty neighbours. As a result, Ukrainian society is trying to keep up with the developments and trends of the globalised era, while simultaneously addressing the centuries-long gaping abyss with regards to its cultural identity, national integrity, political course, overall principles, and priorities. In its search for integrity, Ukrainian society needs to simultaneously link dreams to practicalities, authenticity to urgency, the past to the future, the East to the West (both within and outside its borders).

The interplay between the almost desperate search for freedom and the urgent need to mature is a quintessential challenge for modern Ukraine and its young generations. Unlike Russia, the West expects Ukraine to be an independent partner with its own

vision and interests. A familiar scheme of exchanging 'good behaviour' for protection does not seem to work well in the context of a newly found sovereignty, new ambitions, and partnerships. At this point, it is up to Ukraine to make a choice – either to give up on its centuries-long inertia of dependency or to give up on its very dream about freedom. From this perspective, Ukraine is a liberal democracy in the making, where people are learning to demand and defend their individual rights and freedoms, commit to their duties and obligations, and place this principle as a fundamental social consensus to be respected in all social interactions.

This leads us to a broader, less practical yet even more fundamental benefit of taking a closer look into Ukraine's internal evolution – and Frigyes' book. We are used to looking at the old liberal democracies of the West to grasp the meaning of liberalism. However, liberalism as a general political and moral philosophy can take many forms and emerge in different contexts. United by an overall respect for individual liberty, its characteristic features and expressions depend on a given society, which shapes its liberal values according to its own history, mores, and attitudes. Independent Ukraine, in all its uniqueness, turbulence, and 'in-betweenness', presents a precious material for studying the organic formation of liberal values and principles, first on the ideational level and then resulting in practical solutions.

In his book, Paul Frigyes insightfully traces the unfolding of such trends in Ukraine. He analyses Ukrainian realities against the values and priorities of Western liberal societies, such as pluralism, gender equality, environmental concerns, etc. Being a Westerner with a deeply entrenched respect for these concepts, he

observes how these familiar, taken-for-granted notions are admired, disregarded, or refracted in Ukraine. The author's liberal standpoint is reflected in the very choice of these topics as the focal points for discussion. Frigyes remains admirably open-minded when it comes to understanding the rationale behind the stances taken by Ukrainians, however unexpected those might seem to him. Nevertheless, what is the most interesting in this analysis is a cross-cutting observation which remains unexpressed throughout the book just to appear in the conclusion as natural and self-evident.

Above all, Ukrainian society is free. It might not yet be free of its own prejudices, its own limitations and vices, its past, of ever-present corruption and poverty. But, unlike the majority of other former USSR republics, it is free from dictatorship, oppression, terror, personality cults. The only time in the history of independent Ukraine when people's will was brutally ignored has resulted in the most impressive massive upheaval in recent European history, Euromaidan, or the so-called Revolution of Dignity. The elections of the two following presidents were fully transparent and accurately represented people's will and changing preferences, which in itself is a great achievement and a true landmark for any post-authoritarian state and society. The debates on the leading political TV shows are vibrant and lively to an extent that makes them impossible to follow, with participants publicly expressing their opposing views in the most direct and passionate of ways. People are free to talk, debate, express their opinions, choose, and decide for themselves. And they do so, they liberate Ukraine from the terror of the past that for decades was paralysing and numbing their parents and grandparents.

On this path of maturing, Ukrainians will have to make a shift in their understanding of freedom. So far, Ukrainians understood freedom in its negative sense, as a 'freedom from': Ukraine's divided and dependent past, traumatising limitations of the Soviet ideology, today's aggressive Russia under Putin – but also from insecurity, poverty, injustice, from ever-present corruption, dysfunctional government, unfaithful political leaders. While these circumstances have shaped Ukrainians' ever-present search for liberation, the next step towards unlocking the country's potential as a full-fledged liberal democracy is to substitute the defensive and past-focused 'freedom from' with a constructive and future-oriented 'freedom for': justice, peace, prosperity, sustainability, equality for each individual and society as a whole. Despite the EU's support, making this decisive leap still lacks political will and a strong and organised civil society. This takes time and, considering the country's size and scope of challenges, we cannot put everything on the shoulders of one or two generations. However, the overall direction is clear and the foundation is already laid down. As Paul Frigyes sums up in the conclusion: 'Ukraine's battle for identity, be it a duel or a decathlon, is gravitating towards a liberal, pluralist, and what one might consider a western European mindset' (p. 123). This battle might be long, but such results are definitely worth fighting for.

Dr. Maria Alesina
European Liberal Forum

PROLOGUE

Batyyeva Hill, Kyiv, June 2019

"Is this the way to the railway station?" I ask a man heading in the same direction early one morning. He nods, offers to show me the way and introduces himself as Volodymyr. We walk along the winding Lokomotyvna Street for a stretch while he tells me that he likes the Beatles and Pink Floyd. Halfway down he suddenly stops at a parked car and asks me to wait.

Volodymyr squats down and beckons over a little dog, which limps slowly out from behind a bush. He pats the dog, opens a plastic bag, and tips a helping of boiled potatoes onto the ground. The dog gobbles them up happily. Volodymyr folds the bag away and places it on the ground, by the kerb.

He then stands up and nods amicably at me that we can continue our walk.

1 UKRAINE ENTERS THE 21ST CENTURY

On 21 April 2019, Volodymyr Zelensky was elected president of Ukraine. But when he for the first time stepped onto the international stage in the UN General Assembly on 25 September that same year, it was under circumstances that were far from desirable for him. He had ridden to power on the promise of more transparency and less corruption, and his address to the UN in New York was also appropriately delivered. Dressed in a black suit, Zelensky stepped up to the podium and gave an eloquent speech about global responsibility and shared values in a world in which every war poses a threat to human civilisation. He followed up his message with a plea for global support to Ukraine.

However, his performance was to drown in the media storm surrounding the domestic political furore in the United States known as the Ukraine Scandal, a saga that has eagerly been followed around the world. When Zelensky and Trump stood in front of the cameras in New York that same day, they at first followed the familiar pattern: the pair sat leaning forwards, manspreading in their chairs, exchanging random courtesies, and nodding to each other. Trump explained that Ukraine had many prominent figures, citing by way of example the Ukrainian winner

of a Miss Universe contest (an incorrect claim). But the gentlemen had hardly stopped shaking hands for the photo-op when the first question about the corruption scandal was fired at Zelensky. The Ukrainian president replied with a glum expression that he did not intend to meddle in the US election campaign, upon which the questions were passed on to Trump, who served up his usual word salad of self-glorification and anti-Democrat diatribe.

The presidents were bombarded with questions about the scandal. Zelensky switched from English to Russian and the diplomatic encounter devolved into a cacophony of heated questions from the press in an atmosphere of spirited exasperation.

For Trump, all bluster and bragging, it seemed to be business as usual.

Zelensky, on the other hand, ended up looking crestfallen and slightly disgusted.

Despite all the talk of a common world, it was obvious to Zelensky and everyone else that his presence in New York did not revolve around a new era of cooperation; instead, the Ukrainian president had become a mere ingredient in a melee of accusations against Trump concerning the unethical and potentially illegal blackmail of Ukraine, a name of a country that in the Western media that autumn became synonymous with the corruption scandal.

Trump had called Zelensky to insist that he should open a Ukrainian investigation into Hunter Biden, the son of the current US president Joe Biden, for shady business dealings with a Ukrainian gas company. The demand communicated to the Ukrainian president, who was in desperate need of military aid from the US, was that he should participate in Trump's vendetta against a political rival.

From the transcripts of the phone call, which were wired around the world during the scandal, it is clear how Zelensky pitifully yields to the pressure. The two presidents agree on how unreliable EU support to Ukraine was, and Zelensky swears that the new prosecutor-general was "one hundred per cent" the president's man, as the ignominiously publicised transcripts read. Zelensky expressed his willingness to comply with Trump's demands and flattered the American president by elevating him to the status of role model.

> *We brought in many, many new people. Not the old politicians, not the typical politicians, because we want to have a new format and a new type of government. You are a great teacher for us and in that.*

The comparison between the presidents was not without merit. Both had at least successfully converted TV celebrity into political power, albeit with different intentions.

In Ukraine, Zelensky had attempted to embody the pursuit of the rule of law, the fight against corruption, and the aspirations towards constitutional virtue, but the phone call exposed his loyalty to Trump's self-interested abuse of power.

It was a reminder of Ukraine's historical role. The country is large but still fragile, and in its need of powerful allies, its leaders never failed to pin their hopes on the wrong partners at the wrong time – only to be promptly thrown to the wolves. Zelensky's flattery came from a man who was up against the wall and in desperate need of bringing the war in Donbass to an end with the moral, military, and diplomatic assistance of the United States.

Volodymyr Zelensky ascended to office with a sensational 73 per cent of the vote, after a campaign supported by funds from the oligarch Ihor Kolomoiskiy. In the lead-up to the election, the number of parliamentary seats held by his party was – zero. The party, *Sluha Narodu* (Servant of the People) was formed in March 2018 by staff at the production company Kvartal-95, which had made a comedy series of the same name in which Zelensky plays a nice-guy provincial teacher who delivers an impassioned paean against corruption that, having been recorded by a student, gets him elevated to president. The TV series was inordinately popular. It continued until 2019, after which it morphed into an election campaign. The sequel continued in the parliament that same spring.

So, how is the young Ukrainian democracy faring? I trudge through Kyiv to the affluent tracts of the Podil district to meet Kyrylo Tretiak at EECMD, a Dutch-supported organisation that seeks to develop multiparty democracy in eastern Europe. Five cities in Ukraine have established schools to teach young people about democratic processes.

***

"The state of democracy? Well. It exists. That's about it. The Baltic states did the right thing after the collapse of the USSR. They were resolute and established modern democracies. We went wrong and lost another 20 years or more", he says, as we sit at a table in a sparsely furnished but air-conditioned office in one of Podil's newly renovated stately buildings.

Ukraine has over a hundred parties, a couple of dozen of which lean towards the nationalist side. And almost all

of them show no interest in manifestos and principles.

On taking up office in 2019, Zelensky went on the offensive against the coterie of established, pompous politicians and announced a new general election for that summer. It resulted in a landslide victory for the Servant of the People. In the 450-seat parliament, Verkhovna Rada, there are now ten parties represented. The Servant of the People won 254 of these seats and thus has a majority that gives it a powerful mandate to act. 46 seats went to independent candidates. Another three parties, Yulia Tymoshenko's Fatherland, Petro Poroshenko's European Solidarity and rock star Svyatoslav Vakarchuk's Voice clinched 26, 25 and 20 seats respectively. Two pro-Russian parties, Opposition Platform and Opposition Bloc, won 43 and 6 seats.

The pro-Russian Party of the Regions, formally a heavyweight, no longer exists.

The far-right Svoboda won one seat. The drama of the political landscape, as we can see, is monumental.

"Poroshenko failed to keep corruption in check and delivered no results that were visible to normal people, and so his support collapsed", says Kyrylo Tertiak.

Ukraine can be seen as having three political blocs: a nationalist, a Western-orientated, and a pro-Russian. But since the parties are largely based on the theatrics of charismatic leaders, it is not the ideology that people vote for, but the show. And when the people get bored, the parties can be expunged.

From a western European perspective, the party system in Ukraine is a joke. This is not an insult, it is simple fact. The parties have weak structures and limited regional support; they are hastily rigged up around a leader and financed by some oligarch. After the 2019 election, a total of 80 per cent of the MPs were unknowns.

"The main problem is that our parties are not rooted in ideology", he continues. "Ideology is associated with Communism, and so parties are formed as projects around famous people."

This is not to say that Zelensky is one of many corrupt opportunists in a dysfunctional system. Volodymyr Zelensky, an actor with a law degree, with Russian as a native language and a Jewish background, was viewed by many as a newcomer who took his ministerial seat with good intentions. He grew up in Kryvyi Rih, a raw industrial town in south-eastern Ukraine's coal and iron belt. He ran much of his election campaign on social media, and while rarely agreeing to be interviewed, he demonstrated a genuine will to replace satrapy with responsibility and humility. As a Russophone from the iron-coal belt, he proved himself able to gather votes from both the east and the west, an uncommon feat in Ukraine.

The difference in political direction between Zelensky and the former president, chocolate manufacturer Petro Poroshenko, was not great. For both, policy was about modernisation, liberal democratic reform, and a mobilisation centred on Ukrainian unity. Election pledges concerned bringing Ukraine closer to the EU and NATO, ending the war in the east, lowering taxes, bolstering the economy, making democracy more directly representative, increasing the transparency of the state and, of course, curbing corruption – that eternal promise. Zelensky was vague on his actual policies and due to his lack of concreteness, he became a surface upon which the people could project their dreams. He was a popular, decent guy with good intentions, albeit with somewhat troubling links to the oligarch Kolomoyskyy.

"Zelensky's ambitions are laudable. His motives are reasonable. He hasn't been schooled by the power

elite and doesn't seem to be driven by money. But the oligarchs control wealthy corporations, banks, and media, and the question is how much good intentions can change a capricious and elite-dominated system", wonders Kyrylo Tretiak.

Once in power, the Zelensky regime made some agreeable decisions, such as cutting the president's procession to two cars without sirens and turning the annual independence celebrations from a pompous military parade to a people's dignity march.

First a good TV show, then a political organisation. At best, a political programme too. In this state of existence, in which celebrity replaces ideology, an amiable TV star can knock out established politicians. This is also seen on a local level. In Zaporizhzha, a local magnate with four parliamentary election wins under his belt, found himself beaten by a wedding photographer.

Ukraine is a country where everything is possible, everything is in a state of flux. And nothing is stable.

In Ukraine's political party landscape, with its many rough-and-ready projects, we find names that have an antiquated and pompous ring to Western ears: The Strength of the People, The Force of Power, European Solidarity, and Folk and Honour. You can already hear the trumpets and drums. The parties are often short-lived entities that implode in a blaze of power struggles and corruption.

***

Comedy and celebrity that mutate into political reality only to be abandoned by disappointed voters. It sounds like a nightmare. But according to Hanna Söderbaum, who has researched the country's oligarchic rule, the situation also

results in a form of dynamics that brings its own benefits.

Oligarchs do not all act in the same way, and they have different strategies for legitimisation.

They also constitute disparate power nodes, which can also cultivate diversity. And Ukraine's authoritarian features have waned over time. Up until the early 2000s, under President Kuchma, the oligarchic clans had been closely linked in a network of common profit interests. Since then, pluralism has increased. Today, half a dozen magnates comprise the dominant national elite. Who is in this notorious and feared cabinet?

Rinat Akhmetov, a miner's son with a Crimea-Tartar and Muslim background is by far the country's most powerful oligarch. His company, Metinvest, has its roots in eastern Ukraine's coal and steel industry. But the political party he favoured, the Party of the Regions, has ceased to exist, and Achmetov's loyalty to pro-Russian forces during the Maidan protests smothered Achmetov in badwill. Media Group Ukraine and Segodnia Multimedia have been his media outlets, as well as printed newspapers.

Viktor Pinchuk is another magnate who, along with Achmetov, profited from the privatisation of the steel industry in eastern Ukraine. His reputation is better. As a patron of the arts – the Pinchuk Art Centre is one of his – he is the oligarch that cuts the most progressive, intellectual figure. He has also organised annual European strategy conferences with international dignitaries but has in recent years kept a low political profile. He owns Starlight Media, the country's largest media conglomerate with six TV channels and several radio stations in the Tavr Media Group.

There's **Ihor Kolomoyskyi**, a contentious uncompromising oligarch with a Jewish background from

Dnipro and one-time owner of Privatbank. This, the country's largest bank, was nationalised in 2016 after having been pushed to the brink of bankruptcy in a racketeering scandal. He made his fortune in the iron ore industry centred on Kryvyi Rih. Kolomoyskyi owns 1+1 Media, on whose TV channel Zelensky rose to presidential power, and the ties between the two are a constant source of speculation.

Dmytro Firtash became rich by acting as a distributor of gas from Central Asia to Europe in a partnership with the state-run Naftogaz and Russian Gazprom. His empire has been shaken by corruption lawsuits. He has been under house arrest in Vienna (where he owns a villa) pending an investigation into allegations of money laundering, bribery, and mafia links, all in relation to the United States and the Biden affair.

Petro Poroshenko, chocolate manufacturer, media mogul, and president (2014–2019), leads the European Solidarity party and has Channel 5 as his TV medium. Brought down by the election fiasco of 2019.

Viktor Medvechuk, pro-Russian, former Yanukovych-advisor, lawyer, and Kuchma head of staff with close ties to Putin and a seat on the executive boards of several political organisations. His close colleague Taras Kozak owns the TV channels News One, Ukraine 112, and Zik.

Yulia Tymoshenko, former prime minister and head of the Fatherland party, grew rich on the sale of Russian gas to Ukrainian companies. She later became Viktor Yushchenko's running mate during the Orange Revolution. Tymoshenko ended up being placed under arrest following countless corruption allegations.

There are other oligarchs (e.g., Pavel Fuchs, Gennadiy Bogolyubov, Kostyantyn Zhevago, Serhiy Lovochkin, Yuriy Kosiuk, and Valeriy Khoroshkovskyi, perhaps

even the Syrian Adnan Kivan) with economic power and media outlets at their disposal but with a lower profile and a largely regional power base. The lives of the oligarchs have come to be surrounded by litigation and controversy on the fringes of the law.

The conditions that Ukraine's politicians have to handle in the 21st century are, on the one hand, a series of woes. The country is in a state of low-intensity war and demographic crisis, with appalling class differences, endemic poverty, low wages, below-subsistence pensions, environmental degradation, and rampant corruption.

Yet there is a parallel Ukraine with stylish, booming cities boasting all desirable modern services that have quickly opened up the country to the outside world. Moreover, digitalisation has immersed the country in a global culture, creating jobs in a blossoming IT sector. When the website Our World In Data published statistics on the number of corona tests carried out in 29 countries, it was easy to note with some bitterness that with its paltry 500 tests, Ukraine was at the bottom of the list, below Lithuania and Pakistan. This said, arguably the main headline was that Ukraine was actually one of the 29 nations that promptly reported the number of tests carried out to official institutions – a nation that is now, in 2020, stepping out of obscurity.

As we sit in the EECMD office, Kyrylo Tretiak briskly thunders through all of Ukraine's problems, such as the need to dismantle oligarch and corporate power, bolster small and medium-sized enterprises, find ways of selling and purchasing land, address environmental destruction, and institute a sustainable civil life.

All in all, things might look dark indeed. But for every deposed and often castigated president, democracy has gained a slightly stronger foothold. Kyrylo Tretiak is one

of the many industrious actors helping to strengthen the country's democratic institutions.

What political issues does he consider the most pressing?

"If we disregard the war, which has to end, I see four concrete issues as the most important: corruption, small businesses, land ownership, and a party system based on programmes and ideas instead of personality. And a president who doesn't want to be immediately thrown out of the window must be able to deliver tangible improvements to people's everyday lives."

Kyrylo Tretiak also sees these challenges as part of a more long-term coming-to-terms with a lingering legacy from the Soviet era:

"Communism destroyed our economy, buildings, and culture, but also people's sense of mutual trust. So, a lot has to be built up from scratch. The economy, the buildings, the national identity, and the responsibility. And there's the exodus from Ukraine, which threatens the entire nation. We have no time to lose."

2 THE EUROMAIDAN LEGACY

Bogdan Andryushchenko is sitting in front of me in a Kyiv restaurant, reminiscing about an incident during Euromaidan on the night of 11 December 2013.

"We marched a dozen abreast up the street to the south-west. Up on Bankova Street we encountered the National Guard. They slowly came towards us along a broad front. In the end, we faced each other, head-to-head. We stood still, unarmed with arms linked. The feeling is hard to describe. We were vulnerable, powerless, and yet somehow invincible. Like a mental iron-link chain. To give in was unthinkable. We surrendered ourselves to our fate."

Bogdan Andryushchenko, a qualified vet, served as an assistant to a member of parliament in 2013 in a Ukraine careening between east and west. He was part of the new Ukrainian power base but was that winter gripped by the winds of a restive Kyiv.

"By day I was a cog in the established state machinery, by night I was part of the popular uprising in the square."

Greater cooperation with the EU had been Ukraine's official endeavour since independence, with the first agreement to that end being signed as early as 1992. For years during the 2010s, Ukraine had been negotiating a

broader free trade agreement with the EU to be ratified by the Eastern Partnership summit in Vilnius at the end of November 2013. Even the county's president, Viktor Yanukovych, the pro-Russian from Donbass, officially expressed his support for increased cooperation with the West.

However, ahead of the 2013 trade agreement, Russia applied pressure, imposed a trade embargo, and demanded that Ukraine instead be part of the Eurasian Economic Union.

Viktor Yanukovych succumbed on 21 November and announced that the EU agreement in Vilnius would not be signed.

The news came as a cold shower for a Ukraine in which distrust of the president, his satrapy, and its senior ranks was already festering. A door to the free world had been ajar, and it now appeared that the president had closed it.

That same day, a thousand or so young protestors gathered in central Kyiv calling for Ukraine to join the EU and demanding visa-free passage to western Europe.

It is as if Maidan, or Independence Square, was custom-made for protests. The square is a symmetrical space, an arena surrounded by stately buildings that turn in a semi-circle towards what vaguely calls to mind a Roman amphitheatre boasting a fountain and a collection of monuments commemorating the nation's origins and struggle for liberation.

The stage was now occupied by students. The mood was spirited and combative. The demonstrations went on around the clock and engagement spread.

On 24 November, a demonstration was held that probably assembled over 100,000 participants. For the rest of the week, the protests burst in waves through central

Kyiv with a force and resolve that dismayed the regime.

On 30 November, the *Berkut* riot police were sent in. Unprovoked, they attacked unarmed students with batons on the square and boots down the side streets. The attacks were at once bizarre and terrifying.

Bogdan Andryushchenko shakes his head at the memory:

"At first, the protests hadn't been against the government per se. They were students demonstrating against corruption and the way that Yanukovych seemed to have robbed Ukraine of the agreement with the EU. Nor was it essentially east versus west, but an anti-corruption and elitism thing. But when the brutality began, they turned against the regime as a whole. There was a different atmosphere, everything changed character."

The deployment of the riot police on 30 November was meant to scare away the demonstrators and clear the square. Instead, it was the igniting spark that made people of all ages and backgrounds travel to the capital and join the Euromaidan.

Accounts abound of how people who were normally not interested in activism or politics were in early December drawn into a spirit of urgent participation. The focus of the uprising shifted from the trade agreement and the EU to something primitively human; it was now that people started referring to Euromaidan as the Dignity Revolution.

In December, the cold grew more bitter, as did the mood on Maidan.

The demonstration swelled and come the weekends, hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians were on the move. The mood on the square was one of resolve, unity, and defiant triumph.

The protestors erected tents, field kitchens, and

barricades. Firebrand speeches were held during the evenings and artists performed: rock bands, boys' choirs, folk singers, and, not least, Eurovision winner Ruslana, who performed on several evenings. The entrenchments were beefed up and supplies flooded in: restaurants donated food, people distributed clothes and sleeping bags, and old ladies handed out newly knitted socks to the activists. In the trade unions building, academics from Mohyla University held lectures on constitutional and economic reform and a TV studio was set up. A steady stream of vehicles and tools arrived in the square. Some of the more radical groups even had access to guns.

On 8 December, demonstrators led by radical nationalists pulled down the statue of Lenin on Khreshchatyk, Kyiv's main street. It crashed to the ground and was promptly demolished by sledgehammers. Lenin suffered similar fates in several other cities. Shortly after the first morning hour of 11 December, just after the demonstrators had ended their customary night vigil and Bogdan Andryushchenko had finished stomping around the square in the cold in a mood that he describes as subdued, resolute, and thoughtful, the sentries sounded the alarm: soldiers and security police had been seen mobilising among the government buildings to the south-east.

"We quickly assembled a group to stop the National Guard and protect the square until reinforcements arrived. We walked abreast across the width of the road up the slope towards the parliament."

The temperature had dropped to -11 degrees. It was Euromaidan's coldest night so far. A white armoured vehicle drove out from an official building. Further ahead, Berkut squads could be seen slowly advancing

forward, down towards the demonstrators. At the corner of Bankova and Institutska streets, the front ranks met and stopped silently in front of each other. Hundreds of black and blue-and-black uniforms and black helmets arrayed against a host of activists in high-vis vests.

Standing in front of Bogdan was a uniformed man.

"I looked him in the eye and saw that he was no more than around 18 years old. He looked back and simply said, 'I'm so fucking tired of this shit.' It was a cathartic moment and I had this powerful feeling that we'd win, that the entire regime would fall."

Eventually, the church bells from St. Mikael's cloister began to rouse the city and call people to the square. The riot squad had come to a halt. Maidan filled with 15,000 activists. Time passed. After three hours of tense suspense, the troops were called back to regroup. A few hours later, the riot police had the square surrounded. They tried to breach the barricades, attacking with batons, which the activists parried with sticks and water hoses. Further up the hill by the government buildings, the barricades were cleared away, but the resistance on Maidan held until the troops were finally withdrawn later that morning. Just a normal day on the job.

The confrontation became a brief act in a long, drawn-out performance, an escalation of a political drama established back at the time of independence in 1991. The Orange Revolution of 2004 was its first proper trial of strength, although it was never a revolution as such; it was a non-violent movement with broad popular support that led to a regime change with a new pair of leaders, Viktor Yushchenko and Yulia Tymoshenko. But the duo soon fell out, and as a consequence, the 2010 election returned Yanukovych and his Party of the Regions to power.

Euromaidan seemed different. It was seen in the

barricades, in the making of Molotov cocktails, the self-defence groups and the occupations around the square, where hospitals, soup kitchens, and press centres were set up in various buildings and tents. A resistance organisation emerged and was divided up into *sotnyis*, "hundreds" – commando groups comprising one hundred people. The scale of coordination meant that the human and moral costs of trying to evacuate the square would be high.

According to historian Peter Johnsson, Euromaidan was one of the largest mass movements in Ukrainian history and in post-War Europe. But unlike Poland's *Solidarność*, it was never formalised into a unified organisation. Rather, Euromaidan was more akin to a national revivalist movement, a process of mental liberation in which everyone was welcome; liberals, neo-Nazis, religious leaders of different confessions, nationalists, and anarchists, all stood arm-in-arm to fight for some vaguely defined redress. They knew what they were opposed to, however, and the list was long: the EU betrayal, Russian predominance, corruption, oligarchy, extortion, lawlessness, and police brutality. Three political leaders stepped up: Arseniy Yatsenyuk from the Fatherland party, former boxer Vitali Klitschko from the Ukrainian Democratic Alliance for Reform (UDAR), and Oleh Tyahnybok from the far-right Svoboda party. But when it came to the actual revolt, the leaders were participants rather than drivers.

The resistance followed a logic of its own.

The Maidan protests gradually grew more militarised and physically aggressive. Already early on, the government had deployed *titushky*, paid provocateurs, who ratcheted up the violence, at times by mingling with the protesters. But the resistance remained

united. The government made its next move on 16 January: a bill imposing a raft of restrictions on the freedom to demonstrate, which the Party of the Regions and the Communist Party voted through parliament the following day. One of the targets of this piece of legislation was Automaidan, the car processions that have taken centre stage in the struggle for the public domain. The new prohibition was defied, and 200,000 people soon assembled on the streets to protest against the new law. By now, activism was blossoming around the country. Between 22 and 27 January, a dozen regional administrative buildings in western Ukraine were occupied. In Kyiv on 19 January, the quasi-military nationalist extremists in the Right Sector started a riot with weapons and Molotov cocktails on Hrushevski Street. In the latter half of January, reports of the first fatalities started coming in: two dead protestors on 22 January. And on the same day, the badly beaten body of activist Yuri Verbytsky was found in a woodland area.

And so came the final act of Euromaidan. It opened on the morning of 18 February with a demonstration outside the parliament that was greeted with rubber bullets, flashbangs, and batons. In Kyiv, the day was to become one vast arena of violent confrontation. Activism on the square was feverish: Molotov cocktails were being churned out at an incredible pace, bricks were unearthed and broken into small pieces to use as ammunition. Many witnesses have since talked of finding all reflection and fear of death displaced by a frantic resolve.

Twenty-six people died during that day's clash with the police.

On 20 February, the metro was closed down and the city found itself paralysed, cold, and in a mute state of war. Demonstrators mustered themselves and advanced up

Institutska Street equipped with sticks and rudimentary shields in an attempt to drive the riot police back.

It would prove to be suicidal, as the government had now cast all restraint to the four winds.

Snipers started firing on protestors, who crouched behind trees and tried to circulate upwards. The film *Winter of Fire* shows much of the chaos that followed. We watch as a middle-aged or even elderly man stumbles to the ground, where he is swiftly surrounded by a cluster of police officers who start battering him with iron batons before surging on; one, stopping, delivers an extra blow to the man's head and stamps on his back, breaking, perhaps, a few more of his ribs.

There were also snipers to the east of the square, on the Conservatory of Music, the Hotel Ukraine, and other buildings. The documentary film *Winter of Fire* shows what a massacre can look like when not orchestrated by a Hollywood director. A man jogs up the sloping street with a stretcher to pick up a fallen protestor. He stops by a tree and squats down. A shot is heard. Unceremoniously, the man drops slowly on all fours before collapsing on his side and dying over his coloured stretcher.

As Bogdan recounts the riot, he occasionally falls silent. He is perspiring, and I can't tell if it's due to the summer heat in the restaurant or the memories.

"As the killings got worse, it was like something from another time and place. Yanukovych wasn't from Kyiv, he didn't understand the city, he'd brought his friends from eastern Ukraine, and they were raised in a tradition of virile leadership. Kyiv's open mindset was alien to him."

The final days of the Euromaidan revolution ended with a death tally of over 111, 94 of whom were protestors and 17 police officers.

In the days before the massacre, the Polish minister of foreign affairs, Radosław Sikorski, had visited Kyiv for intense talks with both Yanukovych and the leaders of the uprising to broker a way forwards without further killing. The outcome was an agreement that led to a general election in December and the creation of a coalition government. During an evening meeting on Maidan on 21 February, a grave opposition politician Vitali Klitschko presented the agreement as a small but significant victory. He had himself led street protests in the city in April 2013 and enjoyed public confidence during the popular uprising. But the time for compromise had passed. A young man in a camouflage jacket, Volodymyr Parasyuk from Lviv, stormed onto the podium and in an explosion of passion reminded the crowd of the dead protestors and the sacrifice of the people and declared that talks with "the murderer Yanukovych" were unthinkable.

"Our brothers have been shot and now our leaders are shaking hands with this murderer. Shame on them! Tomorrow at 10 o'clock he'll be gone!" shouted Parasyuk in his despairing baritone. His emotional outcry was greeted with cheers. "Shame! Shame!" chanted the demonstrators at the opposition leaders' negotiated settlement.

Klitschko remained standing on the podium, silent, serious, and straight-backed.

What is a revolution? What are its mechanisms? The logic of what forces change is difficult to grasp. But anyone who has read the classical Chinese war strategist Sun Tzu knows that the ruler's access to violence is a form of capital that must be wielded selectively, strategically – and ideally only by threats.

During Euromaidan, each fatal shooting and attempt to breach the lines of protest eroded trust in the ruler and confidence in the government. The legitimacy of the regime started to crumble.

Moreover, the destruction of the physical environment is an argument on its own. The state of siege that Kyiv endured during these months was itself a symbol of the regime's incompetence, brutality, and loss of control. Pillars of black smoke rose into the city sky. During the final days, the rubble of the pavements and the elegant edifices of state administration buildings were coated with soot and ash.

The heart of this majestic city had been turned into a terrifying, alien, and grey lunar landscape, its sense of doom sustained by the drums that echoed through the streets.

The longer such a state continues, the harder it is to restore any notion of normalcy. Suspicion of the leadership is spread between these actors, who are searching for new constellations. Every regime is dependent on a credible narrative of sustainable order, a belief that rebels are really terrorists and not legitimate representatives of the people's soul. Yanukovych's regime was democratically elected, but its legitimacy was severely corroded from the uprising's very beginning, particularly in the western parts of the country. Ukraine's ambitions had been set in motion, the people populated a country rich in opportunity and raw materials but poor in patience. The protests started when the move towards the West was curtailed, and when the violence erupted on 30 November, the course of events escalated beyond redemption. The struggle for territory became a struggle between rival narratives and their claims of righteousness. The political struggle was transformed into an emotional mobilisation in which

all discussion of political compromise was eventually rendered as impossible as it was irrelevant.

And then, often unexpectedly and suddenly, it's all over.

One narrative has imploded, another has triumphed.

In the darkness of the morning of 22 January, Yanukovych with a little wheelie bag climbed onto a helicopter in Kyiv to depart the city for good. He would eventually be granted asylum in Moscow. His palatial residence north of Kyiv had already been occupied by Maidanists and nationalists who rummaged through the gangster-prince's ostentatious abode with curious fascination.

Over the following days, Arseniy Yatsenyuk took up temporary office as prime minister, Berkut was dissolved, and an order was issued for Yanukovych's arrest. The now fugitive president had already been in prison on two occasions in his youth (for assault and robbery) and was now back at square one, with a place in posterity as a bandit. Yanukovych, who had been democratically re-elected in 2010, would end up in the history books as a bloodstained, criminal public enemy. In 2019, he was convicted of high treason in his absence.

But hot on the heels of Euromaidan was the war. Already back on 27 February, armed pro-Russian troops took over key buildings in the Crimean capital of Simferopol. This was a part of Ukraine that had long been Russian in character and was home to a naval base strategically vital for Russia. As this took place, posts were erected around Crimea's military bases and parliament by soldiers who, lacking military insignia on their uniforms, came to be dubbed "little green men". It was not until December 2015 that Russian president Vladimir Putin admitted to the Russian military presence in Crimea. Before long, Russian-backed

separatists in Donbass in eastern Ukraine mobilised themselves to declare independence from Ukraine.

The war, which had in effect begun by now, was never declared openly, shrouded as it was in talk of democratically sanctioned autonomy. Officially, there was no formal Russian invasion either. But real and extensive Russian military intervention in the shape of soldiers and materiel underpinned the course of events. While Putin's support for the breakaway region's rebels won sympathy at home, it would also result in costly isolation. Over the past six years, the fighting has continued and exerted constant pressure on the Ukrainian economy. As of 2020, according to the UNHCR, the human cost for Ukraine amounted to 13,000 dead, including 3,344 civilians, along with 30,000 wounded and around 1.5 million internally displaced persons.

Bogdan Andryushchenko currently works as a food safety consultant. How does he look upon the legacy of the revolution in which he took part?

"With pride, sorrow, and a little disappointment. That's how I'd sum it up. I'm proud that the idea of a new Ukraine has taken root. But I feel sad that it came at such a cost with so many lives lost. And I feel disappointed that the corruption hasn't gone away and that the old guard still holds key positions."

He plucks thoughtfully at a solitary crust of bread lying on his plate after our lunch.

"After the revolution, the Ministry of Justice oversaw a purge of Yanukovych loyalists. But they've bribed their way back into the system. It's actually less about money than about personal connections and competence."

And Maidan today? On one of many similar evenings, I stroll across the square, the stage that has recovered its splendour and now seethes with boisterous joie-de-

vivre, with street performances, rock, hip-hop dancing, and Russian acrobatics to Kalinka music. In the outdoor seating of a restaurant, young women in S&M gear perform a kind of erotic dance next to an exhibition about the murder of Ukrainians in the Gulag. Souvenir hawkers, hookahs, football tricks – everything and everyone gets an audience while roaring, pimped-up cars file brazenly past on the wide Khreshchatyk Street and families and tourists stroll blithely along the pavements.

As if the slightest show of moderation is an affront to a freedom that may never again be stifled.

The party must go on.

3 MEN'S FIGHTS AND WOMEN'S STRUGGLES

A train ride through Ukraine is a journey through different yet simultaneous epochs. I travelled southwards from Kyiv on the Euro Express. Fast, cool, and sober, where the only reminder of Ukraine's sluggish origins was the young female conductor's programmatic peevishness. Such modern trains have most of their seats orientated forwards, noses eagerly pointing towards a future in Europe.

But the night train from Kryvyi Rih to Kharkiv is a proper Ukrainian train, bright blue on the outside, with red carpets and conductors serving tea on the inside. Here, we budget travellers rattle ahead in small eight-seat compartments, facing each other in a kind of living room environment where a sense of family quickly forms.

Myself, I end up in the arms of Ivan and his family on their way home to Poltava. When I introduce myself as Swedish, I suddenly become popular and they offer me generous quantities of *salo*, the pork rinds that are the pride of traditional Ukrainian cuisine. To accompany it, they fish out some bread and *nalyvka*, a red pick-me-up with the taste of cherries. From two plastic bags, Ivan's wife conjures forth dish after dish, insisting that I eat my fill. Sausages, crisp bread, chips, pilsner, and another shot

of *nalyvka*, and whaddya know, here come the pickled gherkins! I eat, and since no one in the compartment can speak English – not even Ivan's young daughter and her boyfriend – I stumble along in my Ukrainian, which is somewhere between useless and non-existent.

"*Poltava krasivyy misto*, Poltava is a beautiful city", I say. "*I have been there before*. No, not *historishnyy*, in the 18th century, but *with a friend*, er, *tavaresh… kompanyon*."

Ivan toasts me contentedly and agrees. Poltava is nice. Ukraine is nice. But the state of the nation is not nice.

"No good. The war. Putin! A bandit. Took Donbass. Like Hitler – like Hitler!"

He shakes his head, troubled. His wife unfolds cloth napkins of food and makes a joke that I don't understand. Presses a beer on me. But that's where I draw the line and I politely decline. Beer goes straight through me, and I don't want to have to run to the loo four times during the night.

"No, thank you. *Duzhe*. Toilet." A lot of toilet.

Yes, the train toilets. We should mention the toilets. An experience that can only be described as… well, indescribable. You open the door and step into a multimedia experience – visually, aurally, olfactorily. The scent that hits you – thick, caustic, suffocating. And the noise: the train clattering and heaving with the heart-searing screeches of a horror film. An occasional dull thud as the carriage shudders. And then there's the visual: a closet from the previous century in burnished steel with heavy iron fittings, dents, and scratches, where it is impossible to tell old patches of rust from fresh faeces. The bowl that may only be used when the train is in motion since the excrement is portioned out during the journey.

On top of this, there is no water or, of course, paper. This inferno, this shaking, trembling, screeching, thumping, and stinking thing, you abandon all hope and enter, alone and desperate. You invent strategies to touch as little as possible without falling over. It's possible. Anything's possible.

Ivan, the wife, the daughter, and the son-in-law have lifted the mood with their good humour, food, and endless chatter. The young conductor has been attracted by our animated company and stands in the doorway with the ghost of a smile on his face. But suddenly Ivan turns serious:

"Paul. I, in military service, 1986. Chernobyl. Three months. *Lidvidator*. You understand?"

"Chernobyl, a problem? You sick?

"No, not sick. Hard work."

We chew our pickled gherkins in silence. I reflect upon Chernobyl's significance. A collective nightmare, a civil war, a mission in a Hell that one was brought up to believe was an Eden.

Ivan knocks back a *nalyvka* and shakes off his discomposure.

"Paul, you have family?"

"Yes", I reply. "A wife and two daughters, 13 and 15."

"Good, Paul, good! Family is important."

"Yes, it's good."

"Important. Not like in Kyiv."

"Kyiv?"

"Gay parade! Homosexuals! Ptui!" says Ivan with a dismissive gesture, symbolically spitting on the compartment floor. "Ptui! *Amerykanskyy*! Soros!"

Soros and the queers! Of course. I give Ivan a cheerful nod. Make a note to self: Must check up that Soros guy:

Suspected homosexual infiltration!

I drain my glass and make to head off to the toilet.

No. Joking aside. Ivan may be condemned and mocked for his homophobia – such a fitting portrait of Genuine Eastern European Primitivism. We smile as heartily at the attitude as we do at Sascha Baron Cohen's mockumentary of the fictitious reporter Borat from Kazakhstan, with values drawn straight from a Central Asian middle age.

And Ukraine is hardly gay-friendly. When the US "fact tank" the Pew Research Center polled young people's attitudes towards gay marriage, Sweden was at the bottom with only five per cent opposed. In Georgia, 94 per cent were against "homo-marriage", with Russia and Ukraine not far behind, at 86 and 82 per cent, respectively.

And at the outbreak of the corona pandemic in 2020, the honorary patriarch of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, Filaret Denysenko, pointed the finger of blame at same-sex marriage. Shortly afterwards, the activist group Insight LGBTQ announced that they intended to sue the patriarch for inciting discrimination against vulnerable groups.

So, my train companion Ivan was hardly alone in his views on homosexuality. His opinion is, of course, despicable, but it is still worth trying to understand. At heart, it can be an expression of something other than the gratuitous hatred of a minority.

In the recent past, Ukraine has stepped from a distorted Soviet social logic straight into teetering capitalism and tentative democracy. While the fortunate few became rich, for many people conditions have only improved marginally, if at all. Poverty, cancer, disease, car accidents, alcoholism, they are all still prevalent. A normal family outside the globalised urban centres

has, all in all, few opportunities to make something grand in life. For the majority, none of the siren songs of modernity has been quick to fulfil the promises of a golden future, be it communism, nationalism, democracy, or capitalism.

But the family itself is a choice, where the individual can have influence, create order, and establish a biological context. It is available for all and possible to venerate and defend. The question is whether Ivan actually gives two hoots about how homosexuals live their lives. Perhaps the Pride Parade simply symbolises an alien phenomenon that he thinks mocks what gives his own life meaning and value?

Step a few centimetres outside the borders of Scandinavia and you tumble into a world of attitudes towards gender roles that tend to be dismissed as mediaeval in the Swedish public discourse. No, I'm exaggerating. Let me nuance this: the 19th century begins after the Oresund bridge; cross the Fehmarn Belt and you are in the 18th century; venture beyond the Oder to the east or the Pyrenees to the south, and you will find yourself in the Middle Ages.

Ukraine is no exception.

When the Pew Research Center asked Europeans if gender equality was important, Sweden came was at the top with 96 per cent responding in the affirmative. At the bottom was Russia, with 54 per cent. Hovering just above with 57 per cent was Ukraine.

Ordinary Ukraine, if we are to talk of such an entity, must for now be classed as a markedly macho country.

A curious sign of this is all the degenerated debates in Verkhovna Rada, the Ukrainian parliament. If the term "Polish parliament" is used in Sweden to express general chaos, then Ukraine's Verkhovna Rada is well placed to

lend its name to a feistier phenomenon. Since 2000, debate after debate on sensitive issues have ended in a barrage of fists, eggs, smoke grenades, tea, and water bottles.

In a demonstration of some resourcefulness against the threat of egg bombardment, the chairman has taken to arming himself with an umbrella, which he unfolds when the artillery begins.

Effectively every year of the 2010s, the parliament has hosted an out-and-out brawl, often between the far-right nationalists and the pro-Russians. During one attempt to influence the parliament's decision-making process, the chairman was locked inside his office.

One member of parliament, Vitali Klitschko, Maidan leader and former world champion boxer and current mayor of Kyiv, has kept himself out of such occasions and remained quietly standing by his bench, dignified and coolly observant. The same cannot be said for his fellow parliamentarian, Oleh Lyashko. A former shepherd, tractor driver, and journalist, Lyashko became leader of the Radical Party Oleh Lyashko, a nationalist party whose emblem of choice is a pitchfork. With his belligerent debating style, he has become embroiled in many of these parliamentary punch-ups. Although he lost his seat in the 2019 election, the struggle continues. That same November, in the VIP lounge of Kyiv's Boryspil airport, Lyashko attacked Zelensky-ite politician Andriy Gerus and shoved him up against the wall. He even made sure that the whole incident was filmed and proudly posted a clip of it on social media.

Russian media have reported on the outbreaks of violence in the Ukrainian parliament with barely concealed glee, and when Russia Today showed a video of a face-off that ended in a profuse nosebleed, the reporter even felt at liberty to share a defensive quote from one of

the brawlers: "It was a fight against corruption."

On another occasion in 2014, outside the parliament, people on the street intervened by picking up MP Vitaly Zhuravsky and carrying him to a large waste bin, into which they crammed him with grim determination.

To the outsider, these outbursts are high octane comedy. But they are also fundamentally tragic and above all embarrassing for an institution that represents the people's will and enlightened debate. After all, this was meant to be a country striving to establish modern democracy.

To me as a Swede, such showdowns are also incomprehensible. Perhaps because I don't see the debates from the vantage point of those involved, as real human conflicts, but from that of the camera, where political debates are staged only to be filtered and interpreted by the mass media. When these fights play out on YouTube, the politicians merely come across as primitive and ridiculous.

I ask Lviv-based sociologist and feminist Tamara Zlobina how they are to be understood.

"My spontaneous reaction is quite simply that they're idiots. But there's a broader explanation, I know that. In the '90s, after the power structures of Sovietism had collapsed, the rules of masculinity in Ukraine were renegotiated. Gangsta culture was romanticised pretty vigorously in the county. There was a re-conquering of a kind of revived physical masculinity."

1990s Ukraine, with its economic collapse, shook society in its foundations, Tamara Zlobina tells me. Not just economically, but socially too.

"Many of those who advanced in Ukrainian public life as a businessman or politician had a criminal background. And with rapid privatisation came new

types of leaders – aggressive, uncompromising, and cynical macho men, who created networks, shared state property between them, and developed the corruption schemes. And as these new powerholders entered parliament, these criminal behaviour patterns moved in with them."

Tamara Zlobina also claims that the economic crisis, which over a matter of years erased 60 per cent of the country's GDP, set gender roles reeling. After the early 1990s, the population rate nosedived, and as people struggled for their survival, Ukraine surrendered itself to more traditional gender roles. Women were marginalised in the public space and placed within the family. Today, the Ukrainian population is also heavily tilted towards the female, with 100 women to every 86.3 men. Life expectancy for women and men is, respectively, 76 and 66, which according to a 2015 study by the Pew Research Center is the fifth largest difference in the world (the global average is 4.5 years), a disparity to which war and alcoholism have been major contributors.

So, despite – or possibly because of – the officially proclaimed gender equality of the Soviet era, Ukraine maintains traditional values as regards gender roles. One study from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) reports that during their childhood, one in four Ukrainians saw their father hit their mother. Seventy per cent of Ukrainian men believe that women's most important roles are as cook and family carer. Abortion is permitted up to week twelve, but a majority of the country thinks it should be made illegal. Just over one third of the country defends abortion rights.

The World Value Survey publishes a map of national values along two axes, one of which runs a scale of

attitudes from traditional to secular-rational. Ukraine is found relatively high on this scale towards the latter end, indicating a rather modern, distanced view of religion and traditions. The other axis runs between survival and self-expression. In 2019, Ukraine was far down on the survival scale – much further down than it was in 2008 – indicating a greater prioritisation of law, order, and material matters.

"Sexism is a serious problem in Ukraine's workplaces", says Olga Nemanezhyna, whom I have lunch with one August day in the district of Podil. She is currently the liberal party Syla Lyudey's [People's Power] international secretary and head of its women's association, in which capacity she advocates for gender equality and women having a greater influence in politics.

"I suffered from it early on in my professional life, and it wounded me deeply."

Olga grew up in Donbass, studied international relations and economics at university, and after having won a student competition, she was invited in 2010 to be an assistant at the government offices for the country's first deputy prime minister.

"It was like being thrown into a completely different world, with fine clothes, important meetings, and conferences at which I had a role that imparted considerable responsibility. After a while, however, one of my superiors said that we should go on a private date. I declined, wanting to maintain a professional relationship."

But he grew increasingly persistent. When Olga brought up the matter with her boss, she was advised to accept. After all, he was an important political figure, and he was accustomed to getting his way.

"I really looked up to my bosses in those early years.

They had power and were building a new Ukraine. But the pressure didn't let up and I kept getting propositioned." Her working day was one of continual evasion and bartering, and when she finally tried to raise the matter once and for all, her overly attentive superior hit the roof and threatened to destroy Olga's life.

"By that point I'd had enough. I had to quit. My job had become one years-long nightmare. It was really traumatic. I was so disappointed in the people I'd admired and felt that my professional ambitions had been dashed. Years of constant stress had ground my career dreams to dust."

"These experiences led to chronic stress and dragged me down into a personal crisis that took years to climb out of. And I'm far from the only one to have been subjected to such treatment."

Today, Olga has been able to establish a normal working life but says that what she went through heavily impacted her behaviour. She is constantly on her guard, she says, and to a certain degree oversensitive to different signs of sexist power abuse.

"I daresay some people see me as standoffish and supercilious, and this business is energy-draining. But I try to look ahead and not live as a victim but as an actor and leader."

Olga tells me that Ukraine has a long way to go before equality in the workplace is achieved. What does she think it will take to bring about lasting change?

"Legislation and penalties around sexism. That's essential. But it's also about changing mentalities and making sexism unacceptable", she says.

Ukraine's gender equality movement is making headway but facing opposition. One reason for this is the fractured nature of the feminist movement, which is

all too visible in the run-up to the annual International Women's Day celebrations on 8 March. The main parade has on several occasions been boycotted by different women's movements. Some organisations think that Women's Day, having been an official holiday since Soviet times, should be abolished as part of the country's "de-Communisation" process. Others claim that Women's Day is a conservative tradition that endows women with flowers and presents instead of genuine power. Some movements react to how in refusing to criminalise prostitution, the women's movement is merely confirming the systematic exploitation of women. An anti-patriarchal, anarchist movement, The Rhythm of Resistance, has protested the lack of interest shown by the official women's march in terms of showing solidarity with other marginalised groups. Further, the protest movement FEMEN in Ukraine has performed various bare-chested actions to protest what it sees as the three pillars of patriarchy: dictatorship, the sex industry, and the Orthodox Church. FEMEN's most prominent Ukrainian representative is the high-profile and often, at least during demonstrations, topless Inna Shevchenko, who is quoted by The Guardian as calling Ukraine a "women's hell", a meat market where they are continually being prodded and groped. "I'm proud that we've brought the concepts of feminism and women's rights to a politically ignorant part of the world, like Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus", she told the newspaper. Shevchenko, who does not shy away from provocation in either word or deed, asserts that FEMEN is a kind of feminist terrorist group and that feminism is incompatible with monotheistic religions. It was for this very reason that in August 2012, Inna Shevchenko took a chainsaw to a Christian memorial cross in central Kyiv

in support of the activist group Pussy Riot in Moscow.

Her protest was not viewed favourably at home, and Shevchenko applied for and was granted asylum in France.

The criticism of the church as an institution has, in turn, left some sectors of the population sceptical of feminism. The topless protests have also sown distrust in women's groups that argue that the exposure of bodies merely perpetuates the view of women as sexual objects.

Apart from this internal factionalism, the Women's Day marchers encounter opposition from traditional conservative or far-right groups that have often confronted them with banners proclaiming that feminism threatens the national birth rate and population.

"Feminism as a label has a bad reputation in Ukraine", says Tamara Zlobina frankly.

"People who work for gender equality usually dissociate themselves from feminism or come out with the 'I'm not a feminist, but…' line. Already back in the 1950s, during the Soviet era, the party declared that equality had been achieved, so for fifty years there was no debate on gender relations – the double labour burden, violence against women, inclusion in executive and leadership positions. But the problems were there, of course. I think that's very much why we're so far behind, as we couldn't even address these issues", she says. The country's feral political life seems to be very much mirrored in the sprawling nature of the women's movement. Meanwhile, the actual daily burdens remain for Ukrainian women. They generally earn a third less than men, even though they are typically more highly qualified. And violence against women is still endemic.

A UN study from 2018 noted a sharp rise in gender-based violence. One third of the men surveyed also

stated that they had one or more male friends who have used violence towards their families. Another study, this one conducted by the Ukrainian Institute for Social Research in 2017, showed that fewer than half of Ukrainian women think that physical violence in the home should even be considered criminal. Such attitudes also thrive amongst the nation's public authorities; for example, eighty per cent of the country's police officers and judges treat domestic violence as a private concern.

Yet much has also improved. A raft of laws was enacted in the 2000s to strengthen women's rights, including the criminalisation of gender-based discrimination in the workplace. Fines have been imposed for discriminatory adverts, and quotas have even been introduced for all parties standing for election, so that 40 per cent of the listed candidates must now be female. In 2018, women constituted around 10 per cent of the parliament; after the 2019 election, the situation changed dramatically, and the share is now almost double that. In 2021 a law will come into effect obliging the government to set up sheltered housing for women fleeing violence in the home.

Many of these changes are part of the country's alignment with EU law and UN conventions. For example, a new consent clause tightened the law on rape in 2019. International organisations have also provided substantial support for equality programmes, and a great many organisations have been formed in the country.

Furthermore, Kateryna Levchenko was elected in 2017 to a newly established post as government commissioner for gender equality, and the 2010s saw a strengthening of women's rights in the armed forces; there are now, after a few years' dramatic increase, some 55,000 female soldiers.

"Yes, quite a lot has happened. But low self-esteem remains rife amongst Ukrainian women, and this we want to combat", says Iryna Malishevska, a Kyiv-based translator and writer and one of the leaders of the Creative Women Space collective a few blocks away from Maidan Square, which I visit one afternoon.

The collective where Iryna works with her half-dozen or so colleagues has become a shared workspace for women entrepreneurs. Its central location and spacious rooms also make CWS a popular place to lease for events.

"What keeps women down is often attitudes that have been consolidated during childhood, so they take a long time to change. People say to girls, 'Don't do this or that, you're a girl. Be demure, don't draw attention to yourself.' They're encouraged not to assert themselves in the same way as boys are. Girls grow up thinking that they don't have the knowledge or qualifications to realise their dreams.

"One positive thing is that many women in Ukraine are self-employed. I also think that women here have a stronger position than in countries like Armenia, Georgia, and Russia. But generally speaking, many women have the attitude that the most important thing for the family is to nurture the man's career."

Through collectives like Creative Women Space, Iryna Malishevska hopes that the country can lay the groundwork for broader financial autonomy for women.

"If we can create more spaces for women to grow and support each other, I think we'll see a massive change in the next ten years", she says.

And the values of the macho country, like much else there, are in flux. Kyiv's Pride Parade in June 2019 was the largest ever in a post-Soviet country. The police shielded the march, which drew around

8,000 participants. However, they got wind that anti-LGBT activists had set up a "poo lab", where they filled condoms with excrement to pelt the protestors with.

According to the news blog Bellingcat, the plan backfired. As it turned out, preparing the projectiles was beyond the activists' skills profile, and the condoms split, befouling the saboteurs themselves with their raw contents. When the police uncovered the lab, their plans collapsed. For some, it all ended – well – shittily.

All in all, Kyiv Pride 2019 was a resounding success, albeit one that was not without incidents.

When a similar parade was arranged the following September in Kharkiv – the city's first ever – things got a good deal nastier. Between 2,000 and 3,000 people took part and several hundred counter-demonstrators turned up to confront them. In the ensuing riot, many Pride demonstrators were attacked and injured.

Ukraine is mid-stride, although its forward progression feels like a trek through waist-high water.

Traditions and old, established norms persist in a country that is still very much steeped in a survival culture. But in its careening emancipation from Russia, a new action space has emerged.

4 KHARKIV'S INVISIBLE BODIES

When I walk out of Kharkiv station, newly arrived and on unsteady early-morning legs, I'm greeted by an open square. One of these Soviet-era, deserted squares that give you the feeling of not yet having entered the city but of standing on ground that has been hastily clad in stone before the hustle and bustle of urban life has had time to unfold. Kharkiv, situated just forty clicks from the Russian border, is Ukraine's second largest city. Between the wars, it was actually the capital and grew into a centre of industry and education.

Kharkiv was to be a showcase of Soviet modernity.

It was here in 1928 that Stalin built Derzhprom, Europe's tallest glass-and-concrete building. This collection of skyscrapers, the seat of Ukraine's political leadership with transverse concrete corridors between the buildings, was meant to outshine the bourgeois bank buildings in the old city centre. Derzhprom, the Palace of Industry situated by an enormous open plaza, was an edifice for an empire.

While Kyiv turned its gaze to the past, Kharkiv looked to the future. However, my own curiosity about the city derives from the virtual antithesis of these grand ambitions: a book of photographs from 1995. I rarely buy

such books, even more so at the prices touted by posh galleries. But Boris Michailov's *Case History* of Kharkiv that I came across in Stockholm's Moderna Museet (Museum of Modern Art) in the 1990s was impossible to resist in its peculiar, repellent allure. The photographs, taken in the years following independence, depict *bomzhes*, Kharkiv's homeless drifters and drug users. These were people with as little hope as glamour, unwanted, forgotten, despised. The photographer writes that on one occasion, he saw a young man suddenly turn on a passing *bomzh* and kick him so hard that his bones crunched.

He dropped to the ground with a sigh.

But Michailov's pictures are not just a challenging photographic document of destitution. Many of the photos are naked portraits. Kharkiv's most unlikely models posed with toothless grins, half-healed wounds encrusted with clotted blood, filthy clothes, pendulous breasts, wrinkled genitals. One woman unabashedly displays a stomach tumour bulging out from her body. We see children cheerfully smoking cigarettes, sniffing glue, and kissing. *Bomzhes* sleeping on pavements on the rubble of collapsed walls. A naked man sporting a tattoo of Lenin on his chest knocking back a glass of *horilka* for the camera. All played out with equanimity and a singular joviality.

Life goes on until it ends.

The photographs were especially unusual for the very reason that they had been taken in the recently dissolved Soviet Union, during which photographs for public consumption were supposed to depict the Communist ideal and progress. Everything else risked being classified as an act of treasonous disloyalty and could be severely punished.

Depicting images of naked bodies was decadent

capitalist behaviour, and the poor and destitute only existed in bourgeois societies. Michailov opened a door to the new epoch, with free-flowing liberty and a capitalism that exposed brutal poverty. Ukraine had been on the periphery of the Soviet regime and Kharkiv had been on the periphery of Ukraine. Michailov trained his camera on the unseen liminal people. Toothless, staggering, naked, and frivolous, in a state without belonging or intelligible history.

There they stood, hooting from the other side: We were here all along!

I install myself in a room on Blagovischenska volutsia, one of many streets that has reclaimed its former name during the national de-Communism project that began in 2015. In Kharkiv alone, over 200 Communist street names have been replaced. In a corner of the street, I discover a sign from the old times left on the wall of a building: Karl Marx Street. Further away by the river that branches and winds around the city, Proletarian Square has changed its name to Sergyiski Street, and just to the south, the square that once honoured Rosa Luxemburg is now called Pavlivska Square.

The Lonely Planet travel guide writes rather callously that Kharkiv is a city with much to say about its past but little to show. The description is witty but not wholly justified: in 2020, the city's flourishing 19th century has re-emerged in the spirit and architecture of its central districts. A row of dignified banks in the city centre reflects an elegant past, along the river dazzling churches flaunt their onion domes, and the older city spreads itself out over vast expanses. And as is so often the case when visiting a city without a self-evident place on the list of the world's beswarmed metropolises, one is surprised by the pleasant normalcy of the milieu: restaurants,

parks, street art, cafés, museums, fashion-conscious teenagers, strolling pensioners, and families playing in beautiful parks. In the north of the city is the enormous Barabashova market, as big as 120 football pitches and with as many as 70,000 visitors on a good day.

The city's civilian spaces reveal little about its history of fathomless suffering. During the Second World War alone, its hardships were of a magnitude that is hard to even imagine. Soviet and German troops fought no less than five times over Kharkiv. When the Nazi operation Barbarossa rolled eastward, both the tractor and tank factories were evacuated eastward from Kharkiv. Before the Soviet forces beat their retreat, they blew up the buildings in the centre. The Wehrmacht took the city at the end of October 1941 and by way of example promptly hanged hundreds of Soviet officers and Jews from balconies.

The following May, the Red Army returned to reconquer the city. It was a debacle: close to a quarter of a million taken prisoners, killed, or injured on the Soviet side. Their losses eclipsed Germany's ten-fold. But the struggle would surge on. In January 1943 the Soviets attacked again. This time, they succeeded and the Soviets held Kharkiv for a few weeks until the Wehrmacht, in its final victory on the Eastern Front, retook the city – again – in February–March. Half a year later, the German war machine had been ground down by a succession of setbacks, above all the summer's devastating tank battle at Kursk. The Soviets regrouped for another counter-offensive and drove out the Germans once and for all in August.

At the start of the war, the city had 900,000 inhabitants.

When the Wehrmacht withdrew in 1943, fewer than 200,000 remained.

In advance of my arrival, I'd had an almost comical

caricature of Kharkiv in my head as the archetypal forgotten, rusty, bitter industrial eastern European city. Beyond its sprawling centre, this image is also largely true. Drawn by Kharkiv's proximity to eastern Ukraine's ore fields, the Soviets established a cluster of heavy industrial factories here manufacturing aircraft, locomotives, agricultural and mining machinery, turbines, bicycles, generators, and tractors.

Tractors. There's something emblematically Soviet about tractors, these powerful vehicles that would haul the struggling masses into modernity. "Communism meant tractors – not wooden ploughs; higher education – not eternal slavery; the power of the people – not the power of the gentry", writes Kjell Albin Abrahamsson in *Ukraina, Ukraina*, his formulation encapsulating the lustre of a draught vehicle and political system that in the Soviet Union embodied a narrative of national hope. One of the many mocking jokes that circulated during the Soviet era was set at a cultural awards ceremony in the Kremlin's grand conference hall. General Secretary Brezhnev begins by announcing that the winner of the third prize is poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko for his great works in the service of the people: "I hereby confer upon him the prize of... A TRACTOR!" Cheers and applause. Brezhnev waits a few seconds and goes on to announce that the winner of the second prize is artist Boris Uganov for his great works in the service of the people: "I hereby confer upon him a much deserved prize... A TRACTOR!" Thunderous applause and stomping feet. It's time for the first prize. Brezhnev clears his throat, pauses for effect and then solemnly proclaims that the very finest prize is to be awarded to a patriotic hero for his long and important service to literature: "Vladimir Vasilyevich Karpov! And this comrade, who has proved

not only to be one of the people but also a Soviet free thinker, therefore wins a special prize... namely..." The party leader adjusts his glasses, looks down at his notes, and then raises his eyes: "Fifty-five years' hard labour in the Gulag archipelago!" Silence. Then gasps and the clatter of a pencil hitting the floor. Brezhnev stands silently for a few seconds, glances at the guards and then straightens his back gravely. He grabs the microphone: "Just kidding. The first prize is... A TRACTOR!"

Kharkiv's tractor factory was founded in 1931 as one of five major investments in the union's five-year plan. Agriculture was to be collectivised, its success based on rapid mechanisation. With the help of an engineer from the West, tractor production took off during the years in the 1930s that would prove to be the Stalin regime's grisliest. The tractors became a symbol of modernisation and a kind of posturing Soviet masculinity. In the space of its 85 years, the Kharkiv factory has turned out three million tractors, managing to survive the transition to a market economy too. Today, under the name KhTZ, it is owned by Oleksandr Yaroslavsky, an oligarch who up until 2012 was president of the internationally successful football club Metalist Kharkiv. Yaroslavsky's tractor factory turned out to have greater resilience than the club he once led. Following the turmoil of Euromaidan, the club found itself in acute financial straits, which led to its disbandment and disappearance into thin air in 2016. In many ways a typical Ukrainian fate. Even large, well-established organisations are possessed by an astonishing volatility in Ukraine.

Today's Kharkiv is still a significant centre of education and is home to 15,000 students, some 10,000 of whom are foreigners.

"We have more higher education programmes here

than in Kyiv, over a dozen universities, and lay claim to three Nobel laureates", says Natalie as she shows me around her home city one day.

"Students come here from around the world, and this creates an atmosphere that's young, open, and multicultural. It sometimes almost feels like you're in New York", she says.

Since the outbreak of war in the east, Kharkiv has seen dramatic growth. The city centre is buzzing with new bars and cafés, and while some buildings have been renovated, there are newbuilds with glazed or brightly coloured facades. The war has displaced waves of refugees from Donbass into the effective capital of eastern Ukraine. Shortly after the outbreak of the war in 2014, the city became a clamorous reception locus for the large-scale integration of refugees but has since regained all the trappings of normalcy.

"Kharkiv has been affected by the war. The city has grown, and there are many more of us. And when the refugees arrived in 2014, something happened to the mindset. You heard new voices, different words, and more swearing. There are more thefts in the metro today, too", says Natalie when we stop for a rest at a bronze stature of *hetman* (commander) Ivan Sirko, a 17th century Cossack military leader, posing beside a cannon, pistols tucked into his belt, his right hand wielding a banner and his left gripping the hilt of his sabre.

In Ukraine, military might, tanks, and soldiers are openly lionised. Masculine warriors stand proudly on countless plinths. Often, they are fallen heroes from the Second World War or Afghanistan, firemen from Chernobyl and battle-ready Cossack leaders like Ivan Sirko. Outside the history museum in Kharkiv a cumbersome T34 tank is on display enthroned atop a

pedestal. It was in Kharkiv that this particular model of fighting machine was first manufactured, one that played a decisive role in the forced retreat of the Third Reich from Stalingrad and, above all, during the tank battle at Kursk, just north of the Russian-Ukrainian border. In wave upon wave, T34s bore down on the Germans, drew fire, halted, and then steamed on towards the enemy.

One anecdote that, despite its dubious veracity, says something about the Soviet attitude tells of the German army's retreat from Kursk. On orders from Berlin, General von Manstein's troops had managed to transport a seized T34 to Berlin. Because what was it about these vehicles that made them such invincible war machines? The top brass wanted answers. Heinz Guderian, the father of the blitzkrieg and head of the tank troops, gave the country's leading engineers immediate orders to see if it was possible to manufacture T34s in Germany. Their judgement came a fortnight later: No, it was impossible.

Guderian was livid. German engineering was unsurpassed. Why was it not possible?

The dour chief engineer's reply was succinct: They would never pass German quality controls.

"Yes, things made here in the East have that kind of quality", smiles Yuriy Larin, a Kharkiv-based journalist whom I arrange to meet one evening in a bar.

"*Durakoustoychewy*, as my teacher liked to say. It means building something so simple and stable that not even the stupidest soldier could break it. Idiot-proof." I meet Yuriy Larin at Fabrika, a spacious, stylish restaurant with a bar in a leafy courtyard. Fabrika was a scruffy old brick-built factory that has now been renovated and sumptuously decorated in a sober, neutral palette.

Yuriy, a writer for online newspapers by day, tells me about how the IT industry has enjoyed something of a boom in the city. Kharkiv's trained corps of computer engineers have taken advantage of the potential afforded by the internet. Low salaries are a burden for the people, of course, who have to pay extortionate prices for imported products, but they also generate business and opportunities for Kharkiv. Foreign contracts have increased by the year. One study from Price Waterhouse Cooper estimates that Kharkiv has 450 active tech companies employing around 25,000 people. Ninety-five per cent of IT production goes to export, and Kharkiv has become an outsourcing centre (in spite of Kyiv's IT industry being 15 per cent larger). In 2017 the IT sector created five billion hryvnias in tax revenue for the state coffers.

An IT worker in Kharkiv earns on average 1,800 dollars a month, six times higher than the mean salary in the city. PWC anticipates a doubling of turnover for the industry in Kharkiv up until 2025 and a trebling of tax revenues.

The IT industry bolsters an identity that is not just European but, even more so, globally urban. Fabrika, where I meet Yuriy, is part of Fabrika Space, a building that on its other floors houses spaces for co-working and events.

"But it's in the city centre where the changes are the most obvious. Out in the suburbs, things are totally different, with poor communication and run-down environments. The market economy hasn't been a boon to everyone. In many industries conditions are appalling", he tells me.

This said, Yuriy still feels that Kharkiv has been revived and established itself as a global city.

"Travelling abroad was long seen as a major and costly undertaking. The infrastructure has been massively

improved. Several budget airlines fly here and the city has been opened up to the outside world. The fact that the internet is everywhere, in most restaurants for example, also counts."

According to Yuriy, Kharkiv has gradually recovered its natural status as a modern city over the past few years:

"At heart, we have a European identity and mentality. The level of education is high and, more importantly, there's a general belief that not only can we shape our lives but also that we *are entitled* to do so."

The national identity is a stubbornly recurring theme when I talk to people here. Maybe the reason is me and the leading questions I bait them with. Or perhaps the war in the east has in fact accelerated a process of deeper and broader liberation from Russian sovereignty into something new and not yet fully defined. Euromaidan is said by many to have been a catalyst for Ukrainian globalisation. Many of the country's experts like to declare that its identity is not defined by its language. A Ukrainian identity also very much includes people who only speak Russian, but how long this will remain the case is anyone's guess.

The Ukrainian identity is changing, but at least it has an undisputed champion: Taras Shevchenko, the 19th century author and painter from the village of Monryntsi in Cherkasy Oblast. His authorship was ground-breaking in that it lifted Ukrainian into the literary sphere and because as a figure, he became a fixed point for Ukrainian identity per se.

Historian Peter Johnsson writes that there are over 1,200 monuments to Shevchenko in Ukraine. Amongst all the statues of the poet, with his bushy horseshoe moustache, the 16-metre colossus in Kharkiv is in a class of its own.

It is a statue that is hard to forget, both for its well-orchestrated grandeur – and its profound mendacity.

Its creators, artist Matvey Manizer and architect Joseph Langbard, won a contest to build the monument that was erected in Shevchenko Park in 1935. Its composition is a narrative of sorts in different acts. High up, twice his natural height, stands Taras Shevchenko himself in twisted contrapposto with a fisted right hand and a commanding gaze. On ascending triangular plinths skirting the base are 16 figures symbolising the history of the Ukrainian people from servitude, suffering, and humiliation to militancy, gradual liberation, and triumph under the red banner.

In the West, there is a delusion that social realist art was inferior and flat. This is to confuse form and content. It is true, of course, that the content of Soviet art mirrored the monotonous propaganda and false idealism of the system. But when it comes to form, it is a different matter. In fact, the artistic embodiment of the revolution's ideals and heroic stories were left to the USSR's most gifted painters and sculptors, who discovered their vehicle of expression in this officially sanctioned art.

Kharkiv's mammoth 30-ton work recounts how the fate of peasants, labourers, and Cossack heroes progressed onward and upward to eventual Communist liberation, firmly dovetailing in the Ukrainian national bard a revolutionary leader and a part of a Soviet project.

He was actually nothing of the sort.

It is true that Shevchenko was of proletarian stock. He was born into impoverished bondage in 1814, became orphaned at the age of eleven, and released from servitude in adulthood. He earned a place at the St. Petersburg Academy of Arts and made his name as

an artist and illustrator. When he started to write poetry with Ukrainian nationalist themes, he chose to do so in the scorned language of his home tracts. Even though there were others who had started to write in Ukrainian by the mid-1800s, this would elevate his works, rather than anyone else's, to a national epic. If there was any revolution that Shevchenko sought in his life, it was one that would overturn Moscow's dominion over Ukraine. In a 19th century of nationalist awakening, Shevchenko wrote poems about national emancipation and was imprisoned in 1847 and banished to military service in the Urals for his pains. During his eleven years in exile, he was forbidden to write and paint. But Moscow's choking of the Ukrainian national identity was cunningly handled by the Soviet leaders, who in this respect were men before their time. National symbols in different Soviet republics were not banned but neatly absorbed into an overarching narrative of socialism triumphant. In Kharkiv, the Ukrainian nationalist was made into a hero, one as much Soviet as Ukrainian.

The monument's assemblage of figures – the fettered, muscular, and raging Cossacks, the peasant woman cradling a baby, the soldiers, the labourers with rifles, the woman holding a book, the enslaved bondsmen, and the revolutionaries with banners – extol Taras Shevchenko as the incarnation of a Ukraine liberated from the misery of servitude by Communism. The USSR was a multicultural society with a common, uniting narrative. But the monument's perhaps most ironic and alarming feature is visible at the end of this sculptural narrative. At the point of deliverance, a liberated peasant stands with a sheaf of newly harvested grain in his hand. An abundance of food on a pedestal in Kharkiv.

The statue was erected in the same decade as famine

ravaged Ukraine.

Holodomor, the "terror famine", reached its zenith between 1932 and 1933, and came to be classified as one of the greatest crimes against humanity in modern history; it is a legacy with which, since independence, Ukraine has gradually come to terms.

When the Soviets came to rationalise agriculture in line with Communist principles, the collectivisation of farms was a central issue. In 1929, the collectivisation of rural Ukraine began, and poor crofts and personal smallholdings were supplanted by mass cultivation and meat production using the latest technology. Rapid industrialisation also required the export of crops abroad. Ukraine's farms were normally privately owned and there were also the larger estate holders called kulaks to contend with. With the USSR to be recast from scratch, Stalin treated Ukrainian farms like a pantry, reserving particular chagrin for the big farmers, who often opposed collectivisation and whom he needed to break. The nationalisation of agriculture was followed in 1930 by protests in Ukraine that, at times, had elements of armed resistance. Attempts to hide food for the purposes of survival incited the authorities to raise the demands on crop deliveries from Ukraine. In 1932, the confiscation burden rose by 44 per cent.

The famine, already acute and widespread, now gained momentum. The authorities organised brigades for the large-scale confiscation of foodstuffs, including future seed stocks. Eventually they also confiscated valuables that could be exchanged for food. Some Western witnesses, journalists, and diplomats reported in the international press that a politically orchestrated famine was being implemented. Desperate for some wheat to chew on, people took to crawling into the

fields, where they died of cold and exhaustion. Others became infected after cooking and consuming carrion. Children collapsed in school, the elderly wasted away in their homes. Death certificates, when issued, would state the cause of death as "exhaustion".

In 1933 Stalin issued a decree forbidding the people to flee, following up with an order to re-channel the populace into state agriculture. A growing number of testimonies of starvation that were made available to the party leaders were seen as proof of the treacherousness of the Ukrainian peasant class. Instructions were dispatched to the local authorities that such reports were punishable, for "if cases of fabricated hunger are revealed, the perpetrators should be regarded as counter-revolutionary elements." (Applebaum, 2019)

Starvation and the struggle for survival broke down the most basic instincts of altruism and empathy. There were increasing accounts of cannibalism, a crime for which 2,505 people were imprisoned between 1932 and 1933.

Rural villagers made their way to Kharkiv in the hunt for food. The authorities set up posts on the roads and at the railway stations to prevent this migration, but many people slipped through; staggering confused around the streets, they would end up collapsing and dying outside buildings and on pavements. Before expiring, the bodies would shudder uncontrollably in one final, futile attempt to keep warm.

In the winters of 1932 and 1933, it is estimated that up to 4.8 million people died of starvation. And all the while, the USSR continued to ship crops out of Ukraine to finance its industrialisation and supply Moscow with food. The disaster reached a peak in the summer of 1933, when over a thousand people are thought to have died every

hour. When the expropriation of crops ended in March 1933, one fifth of the rural population had lost their lives.

Radio Free Europe's Holodomor archive contains a witness account from Oleksa Sonipul, describing an incident one Christmas in her home village in northern Ukraine when she was ten years old:

> *In 1933, just before Christmas, brigades came to our village on the hunt for food. They took every edible thing they could find. That day they found potatoes that we'd planted in my grandfather's garden, which meant that they took everything from him, and all the seed Granddad had collected for next autumn. The following day they called on us, ripped out the windows and doors and took everything to the collective farms.*

The actual number of Holodomor victims is disputed and lands anywhere between three and fourteen million. Historian Robert Conquest, who first mooted the usual figure of seven million direct victims, has also added a further number of deaths in a prelude to the acute phase.

There are also differences of opinion regarding the extent to which the famine was deliberate or a side effect of ruthless, misguided industrialisation. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the Russian author and Nobel laureate, argued that the famine was not specifically imposed on Ukraine, but was rather part and parcel of the Soviet system's general combination of inhumanity and incompetence, pointing out that Russia also suffered a famine, one that led to the death of six million citizens.

In the latter part of the 1930s, the horrors of the famine would be followed up by extensive purges and show trials.

Once again, Ukraine became the hardest hit republic.

The Holodomor, one of modern history's greatest atrocities, passed without any contemporary records being made.

The country's photographers were in the service of the state and each private photo could be scrutinised on suspicion of contravening the espionage and pornography laws. And therein lies an explanation, I imagine, for Boris Michailov's remarkable nude portraits of the ragged proletariat of the 1990s. Michailov did not see his work as exploiting human misery but as a document of suffering in the bodies of his compatriots. A belated counterpart to the millions who died in the 1930s, silently, in front of blind eyes and doomed to invisibility.

These bodies of Michailov are also an antithesis to the beauty ideals that have emerged as the icons of our age, churned out in Ukraine's soulless TV adverts for plastic surgery, Botox, and hair care.

Bodies, if they are to be undressed, must be beautiful; failing that, natural.

The unnatural, spent, and abused bodies are hidden away, just like the state sought to hide the victims of the Holodomor.

We don't have to look. But there is value in seeing how people can be formed – and deformed.

5 A HISTORY: FROM VIKING POWER TO SOVIET STATE

Sergei, an 18-year-old democracy activist, tells me that he's from Kharkiv, apologises for his poor English, and explains that I am the first foreigner he has ever spoken to. When I meet him on a hot day in Kryvyi Rih, he's wearing a white top bearing two flags – the Ukrainian and the Swedish. Above them reads the name of the Cossack hero Mazepa.

"The top? Well, Mazepa and Karl XII fought the Russian tsar together. Sweden was on our side. They lost, but in spite of that Mazepa is still a symbol of freedom. Or maybe because of it. I'm not sure, but I like Mazepa", he says with a somewhat hasty apologetic tone in his smile.

In Ukraine's search for a distinct identity after independence in 1991, Ivan Mazepa has been something of a central figure. For the Swedish king to be intimately tied to the country's foremost heroic icon is a bit flattering.

However, Sweden's associations with the country go much further back than the brief alliance that ended with the Swedish fiasco in Poltava 1709. According to early monastic manuscripts, it was Vikings from Scandinavia who formed Ukrainian nationality in its

first 10th century efflorescence. Previously, nomadic tribes populated the steppes, forests, and fens: Goths, Mongols, Drevlians, Khazars, and Scythians. Greek seafarers built communities on the shores of the Black Sea. By the 600s, Slavic tribes had settled in parts of Ukraine. Kyiv is said to have been named after Kyi, one of three powerful brothers from a tribe that populated the area at this time. But there was considerable disunity and the various peoples were often at loggerheads. According to the Primary Chronicle – "The Tale of Bygone Years" – written by 12th century monks in Kyiv's Pechersk Lavra monastery, the mutually belligerent clans had grown tired of war by the 800s and were in dire need of peace and the rule of law.

The tribes agreed to seek a ruler from the outside and appealed to the Norsemen, who regularly sailed from Scandinavia along the Dnieper towards the Black Sea and Constantinople. These warrior-traders were called Vikings in western Europe but were on the eastern shores of the Baltic known as "rowing men" – *Ruotsi*/*Rootsi* – due to their typical means of travel in longboats. In Kyiv, the name evolved as *Rus* or *Russes*. When the ice thawed each spring, they would head south with cargoes of pelts, wax, slaves, and honey, the long journeys made possible by a sophisticated logistics and organisational system well ahead of its time.

The Primary Chronicle tells us that it was one of three brothers from the tribe of the Swedes, chieftain Rurik from Roslagen, who was chosen to govern Kyiv by the housecarls in Novgorod in the north (in modern Russia). In around 870, Rurik appointed as local ruler one Askold, who is normally referred to as the first Viking prince of Kyiv. His grave nowadays has pride of place in the centre of the town that the Norsemen once called Könugård.

The river channel around Kyiv is surrounded by islands, tributaries, and hills that rise majestically along the banks of the Dnieper.

It is easy to conceive of a one-time environment that welcomed settlement, industry, cultivation, hunting, and transport. An economic hub arose here surrounded by the kingdom of Kyivan Rus' (Kyiv Rus), which would subsequently be described as the cradle of all East Slavic people. Kyivan Rus' would also eventually lend its name to Russia (the land of the Rus) in the north. Moscow is Russia's heart, St. Petersburg its head, Kyiv its mother and Novgorod its father, as the Russian saying goes.

According to some historians, the Primary Chronicle overstates the community-building role of the Scandinavians. Anna Reid argues, for example, that the influence of the Norsemen was more about an organic emergence fed by commercial logic. They did not set themselves up primarily as rulers but as dominant operators at a key trading site along the river, the trade organisation eventually becoming a political organisation.

"Trading posts turned into forts, forts into tribute-collection points, and the tribute-collection points, at the end of the tenth century, into the largest kingdom in Europe" (Reid, p. 6).

Historian Dick Harrison for his part maintains that during the Könugård era, there was no strict differentiation between Swede or Rus. The Russes had a disparate ethnic and geographical origin and more than anything else developed into a dominant elite of warriors and merchants (*Svenska Dagbladet*, 13 August 2016).

It should also be kept in mind that it was possibly in the interests of the Primary Chronicle, which was written down in the 12th century, to emphasise the Nordic roots of the Kyivan Rus' to distance themselves

from the semi-nomadic Khazars, who dominated eastern Ukraine – and Kyiv – in the 8th and 9th centuries and who also demanded tribute from the Slavic tribes.

But what was it about the Norsemen that gave them such status in Kyivan Rus'?

One explanation might be found in the east-Slavic word varjag, another name for these northerners, a derivative, it is said, of the word "oath-sworn"; to swear an oath of fidelity to a group outside the family extends loyalty to a more formally composed collective. It is possible that the "rowing men" developed the habit of subjugating a larger organisation during their trading voyages with rules and methods that also proved applicable to more settled communities. Or maybe it was simply the steady flow of goods and people along the trade route, in which Könugård fostered an organisation that benefited trade, mutual benefits, and prosperity.

When the rule of law was established, Kyivan Rus' flourished to become Europe's largest and most powerful state during the 10th century, encompassing as it did Ukraine, Belarus, and western Russia up to central Finland. The Norsemen's names were soon Slavicised: Valdemar became Volodymyr, Ingvar became Igor, Helga became Olga.

Saint Olga, who now stands as a statue in central Kyiv, was one of a handful of leading women to earn a place in early Ukrainian history. Of Viking birth, she was married to Igor, ruler of Kyiv. In the 10th century, Kyivan Rus' had a complex relationship with the Drevlians, who were based in the forested regions west of the city. They had fought with the Kyivan Rus' against the East Byzantines, but had then killed Igor, after which they sought to unite the tribes through marriage with his widow. Olga received the group of

envoys who delivered the message, only to promptly have them tossed into a pit and buried alive. She then sent out word north that she accepted marriage to the Drevlian prince but on condition that they send a worthy assembly of leaders to escort her on her journey. When a group of eminent Drevlians arrived, Olga ordered them to bathe themselves thoroughly before they could partake in the welcome meal. Once the men had entered the bathhouse, it was locked from the outside and burned down. Kyivan Rus' troops then rode to the Drevlian town of Korosten, where Olga, after weeping at her husband's grave, ordered them to dispatch the men of the tribe in a shock slaughter after nightfall. Olga fortified the kingdom and at some time in the mid-900s converted to Christianity, making her the first Christian leader of Kyivan Rus'.

Rurik's descendants became an ethnically mixed elite in Kyivan Rus'. However, the link between Scandinavia and the rulers of Novgorod and Kyiv was still alive even into the 1000s. Olga's grandson Volodymyr (Valdemar or Vladmir) ruled Kyiv from Novgorod in the 970s. After receiving word that his brothers in Kyiv had murdered a third brother and were now threatening him too, he fled to Scandinavia. A few years later, in 980, he returned with Vikings from the de-facto Norwegian ruler Håkon Sigurdsson to seize power in Novgorod followed by the kingdom of Kyiv, which subsequently flourished under his rule. A new wave of Vikings travelled southward, this time not as traders but as warriors to fortify a sizable kingdom. In the fifteen years that followed, enemies were subjugated at all points of the compass: Khazars, Bulgars, and Pechenegs in the south, and Polans and Drevlians in the west-north-west.

Outside Volodymyr's castle stood wooden sculptures

of Slavic divinities with wonderful Tolkien-esque names: Perun, Dazhbog, Stribog, Simargl, and Mokosh. But the age demanded a modern, unifying religion. Volodymyr opted for Greek Orthodox Christianity, the religion observed by the most influential power of the time, Byzantium. In 988, Volodymyr ordered the statue of the thunder god Perun to be dragged down to the river and beaten with sticks. The castigation was duly meted out and was followed by a mass baptism in which the people were inducted into the Christian faith.

Volodymyr the Great, as he came to be called, ruled for a full 35 years as Kyivan Rus' grew into a major power. During this epoch, its northern ties became gradually threadbare, much to the benefit of the European mainland. A victory in the west against the Yatvingians (a Baltic tribe living in modern-day Lithuania) also gave Kyivan Rus' access to the Baltic Sea. Volodymyr's son was Prince Yaroslav the Wise, during whose reign in the early 11th century the Russkaya Pravda – the Rus' Justice – was established, being the legal code upon which legislation in both Kyivan Rus' and Russia was ultimately based. The code established feudal relations and serf rights, property ownership and penalties for a wide range of crimes. It also limited the rights of blood vengeance so that it only applied to the perpetrator and his immediate family. The fact that Russian justice has its roots in Kyivan Rus' is one of the main reasons why Russia sees Ukraine as a, let's say, "organic" homeland. If Volodymyr's reign had been the age of conquests, Yaroslav's was an age of establishment and the formalisation of the kingdom's power and rules. In 1037, Yaroslav built the Sofia Cathedral in Kyiv, the cardinal monument to its golden age. The cathedral is still a symbolic centre of the city, even if its façade has been

replaced by the architectural aesthetics of later times.

Yaroslav's death heralded the dissolution of the kingdom of Kyivan Rus'. Local princes established thrones in its various regions, trade routes shifted westward, and Kyiv increasingly became a mediaeval periphery basing its power in other larger kingdoms. At the turn of the 1200s, the kingdom of Galicia-Volhynia (based in Poland, Slovakia, and Ukraine) stepped in as the new lords of Kyiv.

However, the definitive deathblow to Kyivan Rus' came in the middle of the 1200s as Genghis Khan's grandson Batu Khan swept westwards with his Mongolian hordes and in 1240 laid siege to Kyiv from the Batyyeva Hill to its west. At the end of November, the Mongols advanced and set up catapults, which spent a week punching holes in the city's bulwarks. The ensuing butchery of the city's 50,000 denizens left a mere 2,000 souls alive. The city was plundered, almost all of its 400 churches were burned to the ground, and when the Mongols moved on, Kyivan Rus' was left to its fate as a languishing backwoods. The Dnieper had lost its key role as the primary transportation route, and Kyiv's status as a religious centre was transferred from its Lavra monastic complex to Moscow.

Some historians hold that the Mongolian migration to the north and their more settled existence there is one reason for enduring differences in the Russian and Ukrainian view of governance. By the time the Mongol empire collapsed in the 1500s, its despotic methods of exercising power had taken root in Russia. Ukraine, on the other hand, as Anna Reid and Richard Pipes observe, had been more influenced by the new rulers approaching from western Europe. In Moscow, the notion of legitimate autocracy was cemented into

permanency; moreover, in Kyivan Rus', ecclesiastical and political power were kept separate in a way that was alien to the north.

The 1300s saw the eastward expansion of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Kyiv was absorbed in 1362, but the Lithuanians had neither the military strength nor the ambition to completely colonise and convert its new territories, so it left the peoples on the fringes free to select their own mayors and judges. Western Ukraine, Galicia, and Volhynia ended up belonging to Poland, which also enjoyed long-lasting influence there. For example, Polish nobility rights were conferred on Kyivan Rus' lords, even though they were to retain their own ethnic distinctiveness. The Russian or Ukrainian identity that existed during these centuries was not primarily based on language but on the Orthodox faith, as distinct from Polish Catholicism. At the end of the 1300s, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was established as a combined force against Germanic tribes and Mongols. Polish feudal lords expanded eastward, and from the 1500s onwards villeinage gradually became the norm. As their estates grew, the Polish nobility found themselves increasingly unable to exercise control over their land, so they engaged Jews to lease and manage its cultivation. During periods of discontent, these Jewish sub-tenants would then be regarded by the local peasantry as symbols of their oppression.

In the history of the birth of the Ruthenian or Ukrainian identity, a special chapter is reserved for the Zaporozhian Cossacks. In Ukraine's pursuit of distinctiveness, the Cossacks have been depicted as legendary mounted rebels from the steppes. Their communities initially emerged as a libertarian way of life amongst groups that from the end of the 15th century

settled along the rivers. Some sources claim that they were, at least originally, Tatar mercenaries – Khazaks – who interbred with local peoples. According to more recent historiography, they principally comprised people who were pushed eastward by the expanding estates as they fled Polish-Lithuanian serfdom. Whatever the truth of the matter, they originally represented more of a lifestyle than a people.

With time, the Cossack communities were formalised and placed under the control of a military leader called a hetman. To defend themselves, often against raids by the Crimean Khanate, the Cossacks built timber forts called *sich*, a word that was eventually used to denote the Cossack capital. From the 1500s to the 1700s, a political entity emerged in the areas around the Dnieper. The river people were eventually given rules on how ownership decisions were taken, and a kind of parliament was established to select their leaders. But a modern state with borders and a constitution it was not, nor was there any distinction between political and military rule. The Cossack state was a balancing force between the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Tsarist Russia, and the Crimean Khanate. While under the subjugation of Poland, a desire for autonomy and power grew within the Cossack state. Then at the end of the 1500s, the Cossacks revolted against the Poles no fewer than seven times. "The Great Uprising", the last of the revolts, was a huge success. Leading the rebellion was Bohdan Khmelnytsky, who, alongside Mazepa, would earn posterity's recognition as the most cherished of the Cossack leaders. Khmelnytsky was born at the end of the 1500s, was schooled by the Jesuits, served in the Polish army, and spent two years as a prisoner of war in Turkey. For a quarter of a century, he lived in

central Ukraine, living off his family farm as he rose up the ranks of the Cossacks, who were loyal to the Polish crown. However, everything changed after a feud with a neighbour involving both property and family, which resulted in physical attacks and ended with the family being evicted from their estate. After his attempts to seek redress with the help of the authorities in Warsaw met with no success, Khmelnytsky fled to Sich, the capital of the free Cossacks. In due course he was elected *hetman* and managed to persuade the Cossacks – and even the leader of the Tartars, the Crimean khan – to ally with him in an attack on Poland. The support from Khan Islam III Giray was decisive, since the Tartars had a large cavalry, which the Cossacks – contrary to popular belief – lacked (Plokhy, p. 98). Another key to the power of their force was that he managed to entice other Cossack troops, who were otherwise loyal to Poland, to join his campaign. In 1648 Khmelnytsky's troops wrought the most havoc, notching up a succession of spectacular victories, first against the Cossacks fighting under the Polish crown and then, in May, against Poland's own army in Korsun. The great uprising raged over vast expanses and became an act of mass peasant vengeance. Whenever and wherever a Polish noble or official, Catholic priest, or Jew was found, he was summarily dispatched – a fate that even women and children might not be spared. By way of cautionary act, the armies would torture more important enemies to death by impalement, whereby the body was thrust onto a wooden stake and left to bleed to death. While some of the peasants' wrath was directed at the large estate owners, more was reserved for the Jews, this middle stratum of urban powerholders. In the summer of 1648 alone, upwards of 20,000 Jews were killed. Following the

successful uprising, Khmelnytsky signed a treaty with the Polish king so that in 1649 he could ride into Kyiv as a hero. The Cossacks received three areas that had once belonged to Poland, and Khmelnytsky became *hetman* of a state covering western and eastern Ukraine.

But the state was a fragile edifice. The Tartars soon tired of the Cossacks and their shifty position between the Russians and Poles and saw to it that Cossacks and Poles wore each other out in a succession of battles. In 1651 the alliance with the Tartars collapsed and with it the Cossack state's sense of direction and effectiveness. When the Poles mustered to march back on the east, Khmelnytsky turned to Russia, pledging allegiance to the tsar in Pereiaslav in 1654 and placing the Cossack state under his protection. The hetman himself died three years later.

A time of disorder followed as a three-way tug-of-war surged back and forth between Tartars, Muscovites, and Poles in various constellations. In 1664, following a war between Russia and Poland, the great powers agreed to divide up Ukraine between them.

It is sometimes said that Ukrainians find it hard to decide what historical role to ascribe to Khmelnytsky, whose statue currently graces the plaza outside Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv. For Ukrainians he is, above all, the champion of the early nation, the incarnation of a national golden age and an all-out war of liberation against those who sought to rule over them. On the other hand, there would be no social rising for the oppressed, at least not for the country's bondsmen, who were marched, with Khmelnytsky's blessing, to the slave markets in the south to be auctioned off.

For the Russians, Khmelnytsky is responsible for driving the Cossack state into the tsar's warm embrace.

For the Jews, and many contemporary European-schooled chroniclers, he is a bloodstained nationalist and one of many orchestrators of Ukrainian movements that ended in pogroms.

Whatever his perceived legacy, the *hetman* was skilled at negotiating with different actors in the interests of bolstering his state. Bohdan Khmelnytsky was the foremost juggler of realpolitik, his insight that the greatness of the Cossack kingdom required alliances with great powers, intrigues, and strategic pacts making him something of a role model for Mazepa.

On account of its location, Crimea, being a peninsula jutting into the Black Sea, followed a different demographic and historical path from the rest of Ukraine. Early in its history there were Greek colonies along its southern coast, and then during different waves of Turkish expansion, groups of Muslim settlers as well as Jews arrived, who migrated to the peninsula during a few centuries of the common era. In the late 1400s, the Muslim Crimean Tartars established an autonomous region, partly in allegiance to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth but also with the support of the Ottoman Empire. Over the following two centuries, Crimea, with its strategic harbours, expanded to become one of south-east Europe's most important states, but like the rest of Ukraine, it would end up being a pawn in the struggles between competing powers. The Crimean War in the 1850s was a major European conflict, a dress rehearsal of sorts for the world wars of the next century. Taking advantage of its sick condition, Russia attacked the Ottoman Empire in 1853. Unable to tolerate the sight of Russian expansion, especially its now stronger position as a major marine power, France and Britain retaliated. Russia lost the war, yet clung on

to the peninsula. According to historian Peter Johnsson, Crimea is the part of Ukraine the least associated with the rest of the country's history, yet neither is it the history of Poland, Lithuania, Turkey, or Russia. In the 18th century and onwards, Crimea was colonised by Russians, who came to dominate its demographic profile and shape its identity. After Ukrainian independence in 1991, the peninsula's pro-Russian leaders protested, and an agreement was reached for it to become an independent Ukrainian republic.

During the 1600s, Russia and Poland had each laid claim to its own part of Ukraine. Russia was the first to reposition itself in eastern Ukraine and then a century later in the west. After the battle of Poltava in 1709, Russia emerged as the victor in eastern Europe and the Cossack hetmanate was dissolved. The lack of mass opposition from the Cossacks was largely due to the way Catherine the Great had Russian aristocratic privileges extended to Cossacks and other landowners who had once been part of Poland. Over 30,000 Cossacks around the Dnieper and their estates were given protection, freedom from taxation, and full right to their bondsmen. Catherine II formally annexed the areas in 1783, and her lover, the extravagant field marshal Grigory Potemkin, led the colonisation of the steppes in the south through the rapid establishment of towns and the erection of grand buildings. The fact that Potemkin's building project was largely a decorative façade to impress Catherine the Great on her triumphal progress in the south gave rise to the term "Potemkin village". It is a moot point amongst scholars just how fair this scurrilous term is, because the colonisation with its newbuilds was all too real in southern Ukraine. On the Moscow-Crimea road, however, buildings had

been hastily erected as a display to Catherine II as she journeyed south. Possibly, the term nevertheless says something about the priorities of the tsardom, where pomp could trump durable infrastructure. Then in the 1700s, the Polish kingdom collapsed, and its territories were taken over by the Hapsburg Empire and Russia. A smaller part of Ukraine, Eastern Galicia, fell to Austria. A new era had taken form.

For much of Ukraine, the 19th century meant absorption into Russia. In 1794, Catherine II built the seaport of Odessa on the Black Sea, which grew quickly. Agriculture spread, the steppes were ploughed into fields, and production skyrocketed. By the outbreak of the First World War, Ukraine accounted for 43 per cent of the world's grain export. Its farmers could purchase land and become freeholders. In eastern Ukraine, industrialisation benefited from the access to raw materials, often in collaboration with capitalists, and foreign Western experts were enlisted. Railways were laid, factories built, and mining communities flourished. In western Ukraine, on the other hand, economic development was lagging. The 19th century was also a time of burgeoning nationalism, and a written Ukrainian language, complete with a formal grammar, took shape.

During industrialisation, even though growth was greater in Ukraine than in Russia, it still mainly served as a quasi-colony, its economic growth fed by raw materials, iron, steel, grain, and other crops. While Ukraine became all the more dependent on Russian processed commodities, it was, perhaps paradoxically, also viewed as a land of future promise. Many Soviet leaders would come from families that had moved to Ukraine from Russia. Nikita Khrushchev's family

settled in Yuzivka (Donetsk), the first secretary-to-be joining them at the age of 14 in 1908. A few years earlier, Leonid Brezhnev's father Ilya had moved to the Ukrainian steel-producing city of Kamenske. Whereas industrialisation was dominated by ethnic Russians, Jews, and Poles, the majority of Ukrainians were commonly farmers. But thanks to the fertility of their soil, even though they were on a lower social rung than the city's central actors, they were better off here than in any other part of the Russian empire.

During the Russian Revolution of 1917 up until after the First World War, everything was rocked in its foundations and all the rules in Europe were renegotiated. The Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary was carved up, and Ukraine quickly became embroiled in a larger Russian civil war. The years leading up to Soviet hegemony in 1922 were chaotic and constantly shifting, with a Ukraine bandied amongst the different foreign powers. Russia, Poland, Germany – all made military and political overtures on Kyiv. In Ukraine, two attempts were made to establish an independent state. The Central Council of Ukraine was formed in Kyiv in March 1917 with widespread national support, and in January the following year, the country's independence was proclaimed. This was soon followed by a Soviet invasion of eastern Ukraine. The Council reached out westward for a defence pact and with the help of German troops, Kyiv was occupied in March. A short while later with Pavlo Skoropadskyi heading a German puppet regime, a coalition regime led by pro-reform Symon Petliura was set up in late 1918. For two years he tried to lead this ultimately moribund regime.

In January 1919, the Russian Bolsheviks invaded Ukraine in an attempt to overthrow Petliura and secure

the empire's supply of grain. But in the raging Russian civil war between the Whites and the Reds, Ukraine was initially able to mount a successful resistance to the attack with the aid of the Whites. On the third invasion attempt in December 1919, the Red Army expelled Petliura's forces from Kyiv. Petliura then tried to establish a Ukrainian state from Lviv with the support of Poland, but by then much of Ukraine had formally become a political entity of its own under the dominion of Moscow.

This epoch, with the slaughter of Poles, pogroms against the Jews, and widespread starvation, was tumultuous and depraved. In 1920, 60,000 opponents of the Communist takeover were executed in Crimea.

The political and military power play surged back and forth until December 1922, when the Soviet Union was formally proclaimed and Ukraine's years of independence came to an end. In 1923, Galicia was recognised as a region of Poland. Kharkiv became the first capital of Ukraine SSR.

A hundred years ago, at the start of the 1920s, the cornerstones of the Ukrainian nation were therefore in place. Its role as Russia Minor, a peripheral custodian of an East Slavic cultural heritage was one key factor. A browbeaten outland of the Polish kingdom was another. An alluring trophy for the Sultan in Istanbul and its offshoot – the Crimean Khanate – was a third. In the centre of the landmass had been a kingdom where the Cossacks had planted the dream of an autonomous nation alongside the rivers. And then there was the dominant Orthodox Christianity, coexisting with its own ecclesiastical tradition of Greek Catholicism, based on the Orthodox faith but in full communion with Rome.

In this turmoil of influences and the occasional onrush

of tormentors and with a formalised language of its own, the building blocks of a national narrative emerged.

So, are Ukrainians Europeans? Yes. Russians? Preferably not. Scandinavian descendants? Hmm. Freedom-loving Cossacks? Slavs? Sure. Hungarians, Austrians, Germans, Jews, Galicians, Ruthenians, Tartars? Partly. But why even try to cram the elucidation of a country's history into one chapter? For it would sure be foolish to believe that reasonable justice can be done to the multifaceted country of Ukraine in just a few pages. But this chapter should not be seen as a complete yet potted history of the country but as a description of the key events that have influenced the population's understanding of itself.

During the years as a Soviet republic, however, an independent national identity with citizen rights was not to flourish here. The Ukraine of the 1930s had to endure some of the worst of humanity's abuses – the 1931–33 famine orchestrated by Stalin, and a few years later, the dictator's purging of the intelligentsia. And then it was not long before Nazi Germany rolled into the country. Operation Barbarossa in June 1941 was a surprise attack on Ukraine designed to secure raw materials, industries, and the food supply, to gather slaves, and to break the Soviet Union. At first, the invaders were welcomed as liberators by many Ukrainians who had suffered under Stalin. Yet again, Ukraine was the arena for a struggle between the great powers, and Ukrainian cities were ravaged as brutally as the people were subjugated. The occupation lasted until 1944, when it became obvious that the project was the Nazi regime's greatest fiasco.

One sixth of the Ukrainian population – over seven million people – were killed during the war.

The history of Ukraine as a Soviet republic is, as a whole, as trivial as it is summarisable: industrialisation under oppression, decline, and national subjugation; the union based on the Communist political system where all decisions, developments, and historiographies were controlled by the party leaders in Moscow. But scientific socialism failed to deliver a prosperous future. The Stalin and Khrushchev eras of the large-scale industrialisation of a militarised repressive regime devolved in the 1960s into listless stagnation and military parades. The stability was paper-thin, and when the Soviet Union headed towards collapse, Ukraine was there playing a pivotal role.

What was it, then, that brought the centrally governed, ostensibly unshakable Soviet Union to its knees?

Boredom and waning fear are one reason. Chernobyl played a part, where nuclear power, that symbol of progress, confirmed post-disaster that the narrative was wrecked. After coming to power in 1985, Michail Gorbachov tried to breathe life into socialism with his principles of transparency, honesty, and market reforms, but in themselves they merely confirmed the system's dysfunctionality and opened the way for national movements. The explanation for the collapse that ultimately weighs the heaviest is, in spite of everything, the economy. During the build-up of heavy industry in the 1950s, the planned economy was at its most effective and delivered growth comparable to that of the United States. But come the 1970s, the economy had stagnated, and in the following decade, with costs mounting for the war in Afghanistan and the arms race with the United States, tumbling oil prices, and, later, the monumental costs incurred by the Chernobyl disaster, the empire's economy was set for a nosedive and was woefully

incapable of responding to the needs of the service society.

At a time of ideological détente and demilitarised presence, the fears of the common people and their respect for the system dissipated.

When the rifle was lowered, people began to smirk and the guards started to smirk back.

Ukraine also played a seminal part in the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In 1989, the Soviets had had to release their grip on eastern Europe's Communist states, but Gorbachov wanted to establish a modernised union in a new treaty. A Soviet referendum was held in March 1991, but while three quarters of the population gave their support to retaining the union, it was boycotted by the three Baltic states and Armenia, Moldavia, and Georgia.

The times had run out for Gorbachov.

When Ukraine arranged a referendum on independence on 1 December 1991, 90 per cent of the people voted in favour. Ukraine's new president, Leonid Kravchuk, refused to support a new union with the support of the vote. The leaders of Russia (Boris Yeltsin), Ukraine (Leonid Kravchuk), and Belarus (Stanislav Shushkevich) met at an estate in Viskuli, western Belarus, and on 8 December signed the document that sealed the dissolution of the USSR. Instead, the three core Soviet states formed the loosely affiliated Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

Ukraine, then the world's third largest nuclear power, paid for independence with the dismantling of its nuclear arsenal.

And so, Europe saw its greatest geopolitical transformation, ultimately thanks to the Ukrainian referendum.

Over the centuries, Ukraine had been traversed by belligerent empires that left mass murder, devastation,

and pillage in their wake.

When Ukraine became independent, it happened without a coup, without a revolution, without bloodshed.

It's enough to make you want to pinch yourself.

6 THE ENVIRONMENT AND THE ACTIVISTS: A VIEW OF A MINE

"But what are you going to Kryvyi Rih for?"

When the third person in the city in the space of four days asks why I want to go to Kryvyi Rih, I begin to cotton on that my destination is no eastern European Saint Tropez. The reason for the scepticism dawns on me just after I alight from the train on arrival.

In the warm June night, I am met by a thick scent: mildly sickening, vaguely chemical. Above me in the darkness hovers a cloud, a layer of particles from Kryvyi Rih's metal industry. Everyone who lives here has to get used to constantly brushing away the ruddy dust that falls gently upon the surroundings.

The room I've rented during my visit is, unsurprisingly, on Metallurgy Street. When the taxi has found the address that leads into a courtyard in some alien darkness behind some tall, shabby blocks of flats, my temporary German fellow passenger gasps in a pang of discomfiture. A gloomy, claustrophobic 1960s block overlooks a copse of tall trees. A few naked lightbulbs shed a faint glow upon a crackled grey-brown façade, some of whose panelling has fallen off. The doors are made of solid iron and some balconies serve as a loading space for tyres and plastic sacks. A figure standing by

the corner of the building scurries inside through a door that squeals and slams shut.

The backyard on Metallurgy Street offers me a harsh welcome.

Nothing's actually wrong. But everything feels wrong. After having navigated my way to the right flat, the door is opened by a tall man who gravely and taciturnly hands me the keys. I give a little bow, quietly wish him a good evening, and thank him: *Dobro vecher! Spasiba!*

In Kryvyi Rih, one speaks Russian. But plainly and without undue volubility. A cursory nod is enough.

Kryvyi Rih's answer to the Addams Family's Lurch removes himself without a word.

The flat itself offers a strange contrast to its exterior. Everything is sparkling clean; there are spotlights in the ceiling; the décor is minimalist grey with white and brown furnishings; there's a simple but contemporary kitchenette and on the sofa is a cushion with a printed photograph of Marilyn Monroe bearing the legend "Everyone is a star and deserves to be treated like one". I find myself in a flat renovated to a source of income in accordance with modern commercial logic, at the same time as the brutal condition of the block itself tells another history, of a society in which people are input items in a decaying industrial project.

In south-eastern Ukraine's coal and iron belt, life for nigh in the past 150 years has revolved around what is dug up out of the ground: coal and ore. Kryvyi Rih is the centre of a region boasting one of the world's largest deposits of banded iron ore and a vast processing industry. The city was founded by the Cossacks in the 1600s, and its name (despite its half-dozen or so variations) means "bent horn", probably in reference to some bends of the Inhulets and Saksahan rivers,

which meander around the area. The city's current character took shape in the 1880s after French and British investors got wind of the raw material deposits. Exploitation took off and mine after mine opened up in the area, followed by the residential and administrative buildings that flocked around them.

Kryvyi Rih is by far the strangest city I have ever visited. Not least because it is Europe's longest, having emerged along a north-east/south-west vein of ore as a string of communities that eventually merged into a city stretching 80 km, with factories, homes, and shops. It is an elongated colonisation of functions with no clear centre, a transport route of industries, residential blocks, and shopping centres, which despite the occasional onion-domed church more calls to mind the pioneering lands of the United States. But the steel industry has gradually shrunk. Kryvyi Rih has around 650,000 inhabitants and its own underground railway, but it was the much larger city of Dnipro that was made into the regional capital of Dnipropetrovsk Oblast, which cemented the role of industrial city Kryvyi Rih as being on the margin, a potent but harsh place, made for making.

Kryvyi Rih was not included in the separatists' areas when the internal struggles flared up in 2014 and Russia advanced its pawns into Ukraine. Some have described it as a consequence of random events; others point out that the Europhile oligarch Ihor Kolomoyskyi made sure to keep the city under government control. This industrial city, long seen as unswervingly loyal to Viktor Yanukovych's despised Party of the Regions, is still dominated by the same senior ranks, this time in the figure of the opposition bloc's local chieftain, Yuriy Vilkul, close ally of steel magnate Rinat Akhmetov,

Ukraine's most powerful and wealthiest oligarch.

The room I've hired is a block away from the city centre, a circumstance I would not have noticed if someone hadn't told me. The surroundings all have the atmosphere of a sparse housing estate with a lengthy suite of rundown modernist dwellings. My Cicero points out the solid-looking block where the country's president Zelensky grew up and the nearby school he attended.

Kryvyi Rih's iron belt differs from the Donbass industrial region, where coal dominates. The industrial culture of its two major urban centres – Luhansk and Donetsk – is also harsher, formed as it is by the extraction of a raw material that lies close to the surface. Kryvyi Rih's ore and metal industry, which extracts a share of the deposits via deep subterranean shafts and tunnels, has been followed by a more advanced kind of engineering. Since the 19th century, trained specialists have been recruited from afar, which has also enhanced local engineering skills.

The principal nerve of the steel city is PJSC Arcelor Mittal, Ukraine's (and one of Europe's) largest iron and steel plants with a capacity for some 8 million tons of cast iron a year. The Combine was formerly Kryvorizhstal and was one of the USSR's industrial flagships.

The privatisation programme that was pushed through from 2004 was a controversial story and was followed, true to form, by allegations of corruption and lawsuits. It ended with the emergence of regional finance clans surrounding Rinat Akhmetov and Victor Pinchuk as the dominant oligarchs in Ukraine. The sell-off raised billions in proceeds to the state coffers, was seen as a success, and set the trend for the privatisations that through all manner of bartering transferred power to the country's finance clans.

Over the years, however, the steel industry has been slimmed down in Kryvyi Rih. Wages here are still often more than double the Ukrainian average. Those working in the pits (which reach hundreds of metres underground) are paid the best and breed a rugged macho identity. The ore miners of Ukraine – truer Iron Men would be harder to find.

Despite the extensive environmental initiatives of recent years, the metal industry has an enormous impact on the environment with its emissions of nitrogen oxide, sulphur dioxide, ammonia, dust, formaldehyde, carbon monoxide, and hydrogen sulphide. The fact that the industries are fuelled by coal adds more poison to this cocktail.

"An uneven struggle is going on between the city dwellers and the regional powerholders", explains environmental activist Anna Ambrosova disconcertedly when we meet at Heroes Park in central Kryvyi Rih. She and her husband Dima have promised to show me some local open-cast mines.

"The emissions affect the health of everyone living here", she tells me. "The dust particles blow everywhere and get into the lungs and blood. Studies of sand from children's playgrounds showed that the dioxin levels are many times higher than normal. In Kryvyi Rih we had 150 babies born with cancer in 2017 and many cases of tuberculosis."

Anna and Dima Ambrosov live with their children in a small flat in the city. Dima is an engineer and periodically works abroad in former Caucasian Soviet republics and in India. Anna works at the university and is active in a movement called Stop Poisoning Kryvyi Rih. According to her, activism has increased steadily over the years and has actually resulted in certain improvements.

But pollution is still an urgent problem. In 2006, Arcelor Mittal received a load of 200 million dollars from the EBRD to modernise production and improve efficiency. Five years later, carbon dioxide levels were down by twenty per cent, although this was more a result of a drop in production levels occasioned by the financial crisis than anything.

"You can smell the air yourself. But still they let the emissions carry on despite the fact that other countries like the Czech Republic have similar industries with working purification systems."

Her explanation for the lack of proper remedial measures is that big industry controls the political powerholders through donations and bribes.

"And with the people's blessing, I'm afraid to say. They need the work and rely on these companies for their jobs. Since the Communist era, we've had a tradition of ruthless resource exploitation without concern for people or environment, and during democratisation, this has been replaced by equally harsh capitalist exploitation. The small activist groups are the only pockets of resistance."

Around four fifths of Ukraine's iron ore is extracted from Kryvyi Rih's five mines, its industrial zones taking up a quarter of the city's 410 square kilometres. The mammoth PJSC Kryvorizhstal accounts for 80 per cent of the city's emissions. When the Czech environmental organisation Arnika conducted an environmental audit of south-eastern Ukraine's industrial areas, however, it found that the environmental damage was greater in the towns of Dnipro and Mariupol, not least due to the extensive spread of mercury and DDT.

Dima drives to an open-cast mine south of the city. We park and walk up the slope along expansive flower-

stippled meadows in a balmy but refreshing breeze to the rim of the pit that faces the vast, four-hundred-metre-deep mine, grey-black with faint ruddy streaks. In the distance we can see trucks on the opposite slope struggling upwards loaded with ore. In the other direction, beyond the meadow, the city's industries loom on the horizon and above them broods the grey fog of particles.

We sit on the rim of the pit and take out our food – a picnic with a view of a mine. As we tuck in, I wonder whether Dima and Anna, who are not dependent on the mine, have ever thought of moving away. I don't need to ask the question before Dima answers.

"Just like many other people I can move away from here and live in another country. But why would we? We have our roots here, we're educated, we should be able to live normal lives. And moving is no solution to the city's population." I listen to Dima and feel a lump in my throat. Not because I'm moved by his story, but because the dust in the air has lodged in my airways.

I cough and nod.

But time does not stand still in the city of steel. The patriarchal, self-satisfied leaders of bygone days have been replaced by a more modern generation of younger showmen who, rather than govern by decree from centrally appointed committees, have learnt how to mobilise the people while constantly reminding them of the hand that feeds them. The city is still proud of its steel and carries out different urban and corporate modernisation projects. The collapse of Communism flung Ukraine into an acute economic crisis in the nineties, after which President Leonid Kuchma prepared the stage for the oligarchs. In the Dnipropetrovsk region, Achmetov and Pinchuk got to share the spoils, the latter also marrying into the

Kuchma family. While the nation's assets were parcelled out by Kuchma, corruption was also institutionalised. Despite this, around the turn of the millennium, the prevailing oligarchy gave the economy a boost. Today, Ukraine is the world's sixth largest producer of ore, even if the importance – and thus environmental footprint – of the steel industry has gradually shrunk. During Soviet times, when two thirds of all the union's iron was produced here, Kryvyi Rih was coated in smog and dust. Nowadays, the pollution is more limited, and the rivers, once described as a red sludge, are much cleaner.

And even if the rundown colossi, the sparse settlements, and the brutal industrial milieu reflect enduring traditions, it is obvious that independence, privatisation, democratisation, and a demilitarised existence have transformed Kryvyi Rih into a new country. Eastern Ukraine's identity has long careened between Russian nostalgia and European dreams. With the Maidan revolt of 2014, the country was given a resolute shove towards more Western values:

"Since 2014, a new spirit has arisen in Kryvyi Rih. Euromaidan coincided with the realisation that the environment was something we can and have to do something about", says Svetlana Sova, 44-year-old legal practitioner, politician, and the city's mayoral candidate.

She represents the Syla Lyudey (Power of People) party, which became the hub of a kind of grassroots movement in Kryvyi Rih. Seventeen not-for-profit organisations, once divided, found a joint platform in the small social liberal party for issues concerning the environment, human rights, and equality.

"At first, around 2015–16, corruption was the movement's main concern. But this issue soon dragged the environment along with it. Everyone can see the

environmental impact of our industries, and that the reason why the authorities don't put a stop to it is that they want to brush it under the carpet. Transparency and ecological awareness are two sides of the same coin. Today there is a sense of national responsibility, and here the environmental question is paramount", explains Svetlana.

"Air quality is the biggest problem, with all the allergies, asthma, and cancer that it causes. I can tell that I instantly feel better when I'm in Kyiv."

Of the 64 delegates in the municipal assembly, Syla Lyudey had four in 2015, giving them a platform for the local exercise of power. Before this, the dominant party in the city had been the Party of the Regions with its local bigwig Yuriy Vilkul. Today, not only have the party leader and President Yanukovych been ousted, the party itself has disappeared from the scene of power. Vilkul now represents the oppositional bloc.

The new media landscape has evened out power relations to some degree. When Vilkul ironically launched himself as a local superhero by the name of Will Cool, the oppositional parties responded with a caustic meme on Will Cold, a jibe at the contractual conflict with a gas supplier that left 2,000 residential buildings, 75 schools, and many preschools without municipal heating in the winter of 2018.

According to Svetlana Sova, Syla Lyudey is different in that its political activities rest upon basic values.

"It's hard to talk about the value of ideology in Ukraine. People don't understand it or associate it with Communism. If you want something other than person-centred campaigns, you must talk about common values and use those as your starting point instead."

Syla Lyudey's offices, containing a hundred or so

party members, has provided a platform for activism on a wide range of issues. Amongst other things, the activists pursue lawsuits against the monopolistic conduct of a local gas plant, run recycling campaigns in different urban districts, and two brothers have sought out sponsors for a youth centre.

Ukraine's political parties generally do not educate people in democratic processes, but one of them that has now begun to do so obtains grants from foreign party-affiliated democracy aid organisations.

Beate Apelt, a Ukraine-based representative of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation, which promotes the development of democratic parties in Ukraine, tells me of the lack of maturity she sees in Ukraine's party system:

"The parties are in effect fan clubs for various celebrities, who often start them for a particular election and with covert financing. The parties become instruments through which oligarchs exert influence. The problem with such party projects is that they can change tack at a whim. In the end, it also means that the interests of the electorate are not reflected in the system. It's generally difficult to form parties in Ukraine around ideas of how society is to operate."

I meet Beate Apelt in Kryvyi Rih, where she organises a youth camp for Syla Lyudey's young political activists. Some 40 young people from around Ukraine gather at the camp and organise a workshop at a campsite outside the city. For three days, they practise how to run campaigns, what issues are viable, and how to base their political activism on values.

"Plastic bags are suffocating our land", "Fight obesity in Ukraine", and "If not you – who?" are some of the suggested slogans that the group throw up at the campsite workshop.

"It's easier to pick up a girl in town than it is to get people to discuss politics", camp participant Volodymyr informs me.

"People are apathetic. They think everything to do with politics is dirty. It's weird. In fact, everything is possible here in Ukraine, because we have so much that has to be done from scratch and much to learn. But it's not easy, as people have no faith in the ability of politics to change things for the better. They choose what's the most convenient: populists with power", he says. Even if Ukraine has its populism, it differs from the one that thrives in the West with its orchestrated roaring at the liberal world order. The Ukrainian landscape is different. Here there is no hardened liberal elite or crumbling social democratic popular movement power. Society is dominated by magnates' business projects and transient political projects that operate on the media-controlled democracy's terms.

The local activists in Syla Lyudey, at least locally, are proof that a different kind of roar is possible, a coordinated people's roar that unifies issues of corruption, human rights, and the environment.

The government has also backed the pressure being exerted on the city's industries. During his visit to the city in 2019, President Zelensky criticised Arcelor Mittal's handling of environmental problems and said that the company should pay compensation to the people made sick by the pollutants it emits. He also proposed that the country's environment ministry move to Kryvyi Rih until the situation there and in Dnipro significantly improved.

A month or so later, I'm having lunch in Kyiv with Vasyl Sehin, a young legal practitioner who is working through the EU-backed U-Lead on a project designed

to enhance and formalise environmental protection in Ukraine. He describes his organisation as a bridge between activists and parliament.

"The environment is terribly neglected in Ukraine. We have to find new ways to handle the problems. At the end of the day, it's about having strong institutions in charge of environmental issues. To have the power to really solve problems, the institutions need to be as independent as possible and able to carry out inspections and impose sanctions, even on the country's largest companies."

Vasyl Sehin and I are sitting in what is the antithesis of Kryvyi Rih – a futuristic restaurant during Maidan called "The Last Barricade"; constructed almost like a subterranean labyrinth, it is hyper-urban with a dystopian atmosphere straight out of *Blade Runner*.

"Kryvyi Rih has a special history with a population that's dependent on iron mining. What's more, Arcelor Mittal is the world's largest steel group and one of Ukraine's biggest taxpayers. So, it's hard for people to fight for their ecological rights."

In the winter of 2020, Arcelor Mittal announced that it plans to invest 700 million dollars over three years on the greening of its industries, but just how much this is a matter of regular investments or direct environmental initiatives is hard to say. China has also recently signed major contracts in Kryvyi Rih.

"I see it as us having to build up the institutions step by step, introducing standards for environmental targets and limit values, establishing routine inspection procedures and the power to demand improvements within set time limits", says Vasyl.

But the road there is far from straight. After the 2019 general election, the government merged the

departments of the environment and energy, which in effect, says Vasyl, swung the priority over to energy. And the following spring, the Zelensky regime ejected its prime minister, appointing in his place Denis Smygal, former head of DTEK Bushtynskaya, a coal-fuelled power station outside the city of Burshstyn and one of the absolute worst polluters of the Ivano-Frankivsk region.

A few days' sojourn in Kryvyi Rih can prove a depressing experience for a Westerner. It is hard to wean yourself off the feeling that you are wandering through a dystopia, a place ravaged by a low-intensity environmental disaster. The surroundings evoke an eschatological scene, with the end not coming under the onrushing hooves of the four horsemen of the apocalypse but as a more a mundane, persistent rash compounded by asthma, sickness, and a dust that makes the eyes water among the rusting buildings; and in the meantime, life carries on with its causes for rejoice and hope.

And as an outside observer, it is easy to become as much one-eyed as teary-eyed. On a bus ride through the city, I realise that I've automatically ascribed the city a hopelessness that it might not actually deserve. I ask a young female activist what she thinks about her hometown.

"Kryvyi Rih is nice. We have a lot of green areas, trees, and parks, and it has pretty much all you need, like schools, sports, and shops. I'm happy here."

Of course.

The environmental disaster that is Kryvyi Rih – if, indeed, that is fair judgement to pass on the place – is also full of life, youthful hope, and creativity.

And above all, this post-Soviet steel city has become part of the modern global village with its values, trans-digital identities, and drift towards a new destination that often seems to exist at some indefinite place in the West.

Kryvyi Rih is, like many other of the country's cities, a dirty yet blank slate where people grasp at the promises of modernity with one hand while clinging onto their historical identity with the other.

For a few days in the summer of 2019, the city arranges a local public "Eurofest" with food and music in praise of Europe, and where visitors take selfies with – of all improbable features – someone dressed as a Moomin. And the global power shifts follow their own logic. Mayor Vilkul features in the media at the same time as a delegation from China's metallurgical corporation MCC on the hunt for new business opportunities.

July 2019 also saw the city's first "equality march", admittedly a very modest appendage to Kyiv's rainbow parade with only a dozen or so people engaged in a peaceful march in support of the LGBTQ movement along a short stretch of Eduard Fuchs Street; but in a country where a dim view is taken of homosexuality, it was still an important indication of shifting values.

The ingrained culture of heavy drinking has also waned amongst the young.

And haven't the successes of local son Volodymyr Zelensky been a boost to Kryvyi Rih's self-esteem? On my last day in the city, I ask the young activist Aleksander Pilipenko what the future holds for the city with Zelensky at the helm.

He gives a cautious smile and shrugs:

"I don't think it means that much. Zelensky's from the world of TV. It's politics as show business. In reality, there's no script and all change happens much more slowly. Especially here in Kryvyi Rih."

7 KYIV – A CAPITAL REBORN

Some moments change your worldview forever. Myself, I experienced such a moment one summer evening at the Kyiv central station in 2002. A friend and I had just arrived from Poland and were looking to get tickets for our onward journey eastward. The long queues to the windows advanced at a snail's pace and after half an hour, we had almost reached our turn. Then suddenly the ticket seller stood up, turned her sign around, closed the window, and sauntered off.

Time for a break.

The queue quietly dispersed as the jaded Ukrainians slunk away to stand in line elsewhere. The two of us stayed put, silently gaping. After gathering our wits and understanding the rules of the game, we followed the others' example. Another long wait later, our new queue had almost ended; but reaching the window, our tribulations continued. For no English phrases were understood (perhaps deliberately) and our attempts at faltering Russian to find out prices and routes were greeted with peevish tirades or apathetic indifference.

After a while, the clerk tired of us and turning to chat with a colleague started to pack things into a bag.

Then followed another change of queue, more

pleading at information desks, angry outbursts at the windows, and pathetic attempts to reset the mood with polite and ingratiating phrases.

Our brush with *homo sovieticus* was not unexpected, yet shocking nonetheless.

Once we had finally bought our tickets, we rented a room for the night. But a shower, a meal, and a shared bottle of wine failed to assuage my friend's fury, and he raged on and on about the staff's complete lack of interest in providing service to those who paid their salaries. I lay in bed, shaking with uncontrollable laughter. At everything: the situation, my wound-up friend's stress response, and our fawning, weedy strategies for appeasing the state train operator Ukrzaliznytsia's implacable employees. Sure, their behaviour was offensive. But there was also something puzzling about it, a flash of one of mankind's gloomiest nooks, a glimpse of the ability to cut the instinctive ties that make us respond to the needs of our fellows. Instinctively, either we humans meet such needs by trying to help or we oppose them; but being impervious to them takes something else: dehumanisation. Normal decent people, loving parents, loyal friends – we can all learn the art of seeing our neighbour as biomass. I lay pondering this between my sheets – and slowly it came to me. The reason we found our treatment so mystifying was that we automatically assumed a prevailing market logic centred on our customer needs. The perspective of the staff was of another kind, with different motives and motivations. The Ukrzaliznytsia staff were parts of an earlier Soviet transport organisation, whose trains covered a third of the world's surface from Vladivostok to St. Petersburg. The trains rolled and the system worked, day and night, year after year, in temperatures

that ranged between minus and plus 40 degrees. And everything would have gone so much more smoothly had it not been for these scatter-brained, ignorant epsilons who insisted on being passengers.

They were the ones who asked stupid questions, went the wrong way, got entangled in baggage, and created delays and stress. The staff were an army guarding a formidable system, the passengers, the ever-present swarm of pesky mosquitoes, the recurring headache, the threat to harmony. The less they could care about the strange ways of these intruders, the better. In the central mechanism of Soviet production, in its soul – which lived on even when the body had died – the core concern was to protect the integrity and aims of the supply side. Production, not utilisation, was the point.

This insight was staggering. Sure, my experience of almost spiritual insight into the mysteries of Ukrainian society this evening was partly down to being overtired, tipsy, and in a soft bed after having been rattled about on a railway bunk for 24 hours. But it was also about something more profound than the uselessness of the planned economy. It was a genuine discovery that behind conduct that seems incomprehensible, idiotic, and self-destructive are often drivers that, given the circumstances, are natural and actually altogether sensible. In the good old days of the Soviet Union, visitors to lunch restaurants could be greeted by the sign "closed for lunch". Completely logical, since the purpose of the business was to offer lunch for a certain number of productive hours. Customers would have to make sure to visit the establishment either before or after lunch hour. Was not the well-being and the right to have lunch for the staff just as important as the visitor's? That went without saying.

When a phenomenon is observed from another angle, its hidden motivators and mechanisms are revealed. You can condemn without understanding. But the one who really grasps the logic of a phenomenon is better placed to see what is needed to bring about permanent change.

That was the insight that took root in me this summer night.

I drifted off to sleep blissfully smiling.

Today's Ukrainian business, however, is somewhat different to what it was at the turn of the millennium. There are still parts of the sector where surliness, ill-humour, and customer hostility thrive and chafe against modernity. It is not just the railways; the oil and gas company Naftogaz largely operates as a politically controlled, puffed up monopoly. And to this day the country has over two thousand state-owned companies, for which the government is launching modernisation programmes. In November 2019, the Zelensky ministry announced that five hundred state companies would be sold off to private investors over the coming years.

The Ukraine of the early 21st century was a different beast. The transformation of old Kyiv into a new, less familiar identity with a new approach took off in the middle of the noughties. A symbolic watershed was the Eurovision Song Contest in Istanbul in the spring of 2004, which saw singer Ruslana stomp around singing *Wild Dances* with a bevy of dancers clad in ripped furs and animal skins in what was intended to evoke some untamed Middle Ages. Russia was one of the countries to award the highest points to its fraternal nation. Ukraine won a triumphant victory and had to arrange the following year's contest.

Half a year later, in November, Ukraine held a presidential election. Initially, the pro-Russian Viktor

Yanukovych from eastern Ukraine was declared the victor, but when the result was announced, the country began to seethe with allegations of electoral fraud, claims that international observers backed up. Soon both the EU and the US were demanding a new election, and the Orange Revolution flared up. The demonstrations that surged forth on the streets quickly proved effective. Following a second election on Boxing Day, the pro-West Victor Yushchenko, seconded by Yulia Tymoshenko, took office in January. When it was time for Eurovision in Kyiv 2005, Yushchenko entered the stage to award the trophy in person in Kyiv's Palace of Sports. Ukraine had now also waived the need for entry visas to the country. The gala came to define 21st century Ukraine, a newly opened country that presented itself to a Europe towards which it was now slowly moving. Or perhaps I should say that Ukraine discovered Europe as a possible affiliation. In all events, something was born that would grow stronger over the next fifteen years. But the journey was a long and bumpy one. The fact that it was not until Poroshenko rose to power that Ukraine had its first president able to speak English says something about the country's hard-won identity, a planet orbiting safely in Russia's gravitational pull.

More of a natural phenomenon than a political choice.

As a visitor in 2002, I had the impression that the West and Europe were seen as an abstraction, remote and irrelevant. The visiting Westerner was less a real person than a kind of well-to-do alien from outer space who spoke a funny language and took photographs. If it asked something but failed to understand the answer, Ukrainians would simply repeat themselves in a louder voice.

Kyiv has enjoyed a position as the Russian empire's third city. Scarred, charming, grand, and yet for centuries

peripheral relative to the empire's two capitals in the north. Despite its size, the megacity remained slightly provincial and inward-looking.

According to Anna Reid, Ukraine's history of mixed identity is one explanation for what she sees as Kyiv's lack of ethnic and ideological fire.

> *For 700 years it has been a borderland city, a sleepy periphery to a buzzing centre elsewhere. Thrust to stardom on independence, it has not let fame change its style. […] The state-owned television channels subsist on folk dancing footage intercut with shaky helicopter shots of Santa Sofia. (p. 17)*

Reid's description is a few years old and is no longer wholly just. The mentality changed in the 2010s, particularly in the media – as well as by the media. But the pragmatic, easy attitude, the desire for renewal, change, and freedom from pompous pride is still there.

Kyiv is grand but not pompous.

Kyiv's splendour and hugeness can still take a visitor's breath away. The dilapidation remains and is even visible here and there, in rusting iron girders and decaying facades. Ukraine is, after all, a country with a war and a declining demographic to contend with. But in Kyiv, one is surrounded by building projects left, right, and centre. The residential blocks always seem twice as high and twice as wide as those in Sweden and stand twice as densely. In January 2020, it was announced that the city had a population of 3.7 million and was steadily growing. It also has a nastily brutal traffic situation, with a motorway that ploughs mercilessly through the city centre.

The fashionable Khreshchatyk Street with the grand

buildings that Stalin had built after the devastation of the Second World War leads up to Maidan Square, the city's exuberant, self-appointed centre. On the hill above the river delta rises the Lavra monastery complex with its abundant cluster of domes.

And what can one say of Rodina Mat, the Motherland Monument, just a stone's throw away? A 62-metre statue of a woman in glistening stainless steel looking across the Dnieper from its eastern approach with a raised sword in one raised arm and a shield bearing the Soviet emblem in the other. It survived the purging of Communist monuments in paying homage to the fallen heroes of the country's liberation from Nazi Germany. It's just as well that it was left standing, because what could be put there in its place?

During one hot June week in 2019, I move in with Sergei on Batyyeva Hill in western Kyiv, from where Genghis Khan's grandson Batu Khan besieged, stormed, and torched the city in 1240, casting the kingdom into centuries of oblivion. Today, it is a mixed district of the city with tired-looking tower blocks that eventually give way to more affluent housing along streets winding their way downhill.

Sergei offers me tea and shows me the kitchen.

"The stove is from Khrushchev's time", he informs me.

Though I think it's a joke. But, no, the heavy iron gas cooker in Sergei's flat in Kyiv looks as if it dates from the fifties or early sixties. Enamelled, white, 50 cm wide and made by… Well, there is no name. Why should there be? It's simply the Stove, from a time when all products were manufactured and delivered by the people's only company to the only people. But the stove has kept on going for almost three quarters of a century. At least some kind of quality was achievable by the planned economy.

Sergei's flat is of an older standard, but in good nick. The stairwell, however, is beyond disrepair. Damp, broken doors, crumbling paintwork, wires hanging loosely from walls, dust, and rubbish.

Sergei is 25 and works as a courier for a restaurant. He works irregular hours and claims to earn 400 euro a month. The odd tip here and there adds a little more on the plus side.

It is still not enough to get by on. For while prices in Ukraine are generally low – around half of those in Sweden – many import goods are priced roughly on a par with other European countries.

Yet somehow he has to get by. Sergei rents out a room in the two-room flat he inherited from his grandmother. This brings in a little cash.

How do people pay for doctors and dentists? Unforeseen events, car repairs? How do they start a family? The answer to this last question is: They don't. The number of Ukrainians in the country is on a steady decline. People avoid having children or they move abroad to make some money. The pay conditions are creating a constant pull towards the West.

Sergei also says he works cash-in-hand. What about unemployment insurance, health insurance? They'll sort themselves out.

"*Normalno*", he replies good-naturedly when I express my sympathy over injustice in the city, the health hazards, or the insecurity of his job and his existence.

It's alright. We're all going to die someday. No one knows when.

Normalno.

That's just what things are like in the Wild East.

It wasn't much fun when Batu Khan's army knocked on the city gates either.

In this respect, today's Kyiv is pretty damn "normalno".

In 2018, the average salary in the country is 7,800 hryvnia a month (just over 300 euro). The minimum salary is barely half of that. The median salary, however, was almost 9,000 hryvnia, which shows that those who have jobs, especially in the major cities, have much higher salaries than the actually wholly unsustainable average. In Kyiv, salaries are 60 per cent above the national average.

One afternoon on my way back to Sergei's, I take a path up Batyyeva Hill that passes through a wooded slope. My path is lined with empty cans, boxes, and plastic bags. Before I enter Sergei's block, I stop. It's 30 degrees centigrade, and I loiter under a tree looking at the shabby façade and the abandoned wreck of a car that seems to be a standard feature outside the country's apartment blocks. No gruff Soviet police demand to see dokumenty anymore. But where is the indispensable housing association chairperson who pastes up rules for the laundry room and plans the façade cleaning? Here, there is no laundry room, no community renovation days, and if circles of dampness appear on the wall, you shrug and hope they dry out.

The country is free. But shared responsibility has been abandoned.

In many ways, modern Kyiv gives the impression of being a normal global city. But some things in Ukraine, often just small details, are different. Toilets are built with the light switch outside the door, which has repeatedly left me standing in a state of high-octane desperation fumbling in the darkness for the switch along grimy walls. English phrases can be seen in every other shop, on posters and even the underground

announces the station names in English. Very few normal people still speak nothing but Russian and Ukrainian, when at the same time sundry consumer products and fast food chains flaunt English words. Kyiv's commercial space offers a whole collection of services targeted at the global middle class that slops all around the world wanting to be entertained.

Kyiv, then. A blend of old pomp, semi-old ruin, and the behaviours and gadgets of the new middle class. Can you also say that Ukraine has appropriated the values of the global village? No. Firstly, there is no one single Ukraine. If, nonetheless, one were still to talk about a general state (comparable with describing how "food" tastes by taking the average of an entrecote and an orange), Ukraine's average values still differ in a rather telling way. The Weltzel-Ingleheart value map that the World Value Survey (WVS) regularly publishes shows that Ukraine, while relatively secular rather than tradition-bound, is clearly more orientated towards survival than individual self-expression. It is easy to see why. After independence in 1991, the economy collapsed. The old structures vanished. By 1995, GDP had plummeted by 60 per cent from 1990 levels. Between 1991 and 1996, industrial output dropped by more than half, more than the decline of the Soviet economy during the Second World War. After liberation, many Ukrainians saw their life savings decimated. Hyperinflation in the early 1990s plunged 80 per cent of the people into poverty and left a quarter without work. Those who lived on the minimum wage saw their purchasing power drop by 95 per cent, according to studies from Kyiv's National Economic University. This had an immediate knock-on effect on the family, and the birth rate sank. And public finances were devastated. In 1991, the population was

52 million; by 2020, it is 42 million, of whom only 37 million actually live in the country.

In the 2000s, as the oligarchs stepped onto the scene, the economy recovered.

The Orange Revolution in 2004 introduced new economic stress, particularly on the sources of income that hinged on relations with Russia. With Euromaidan and the war ten years later, the country descended into another economic crisis, so that by 2015 the average income was half what it had been in 2013 (CEIC Data, 2019).

Kristian Andersson, a classmate from my old school in Malmö, has been head of the Kyiv branch of the Scandinavian bank SEB for the past dozen years or so. We meet at Beef, a bar with a contemporary, sober atmosphere and unseemly prices. When I put my bag down on the floor beside our table, a waiter suddenly appears and lifts it delicately onto a small leather-strapped stool that he produces for this very purpose.

"After the huge post-Euromaidan setback, Ukraine's economy has recovered somewhat. Officially, growth has been around 2.5 per cent in the past few years – probably more, given the shadow economy. But the class differences are huge, and I don't think that's good for the country", Kristian explains.

Income tax is one fifth of salary plus a 1.5 per cent surtax extracted to cover the costs of the war against Russia. A report from the World Bank states that growth is too low to reduce poverty and become more aligned with neighbouring European states. Per capita purchasing power is a third of Poland's and poverty is higher than it was in 2014. Growth in productivity and investments is low and is stymied by the declining population. To stimulate investments, the government

has treated companies to tax relief. Kristian says, however, that in many ways developments have been heading in the right direction. The bank sector has been cleaned up, and the currency has stabilised. The population is educated and often ambitious, and Ukraine has a free trade agreement with the EU.

But the proportion of bad loans, meaning loans with defaulted repayments, is ridiculously high: 50 per cent, as opposed to one per cent in Sweden.

"Many of the big borrowers don't make the required repayments and get away with it because the court system is so broken. This puts creditors on alert, generally making it difficult to take out loans for investments. The country has substantial assets. Ukraine is still one of the world's biggest grain exporters and exports huge volumes from the coal and steel belt in the east. The IT industry is mushrooming, especially in eastern Ukraine and Kyiv."

Kristian and I haven't seen each other for forty years. In the half-empty restaurant, we talk about old classmates in Sweden and where they are now, share memories of souped-up mopeds roaring along the small tracks around Limhamn's limestone quarry, and discuss the state of our ageing parents. Our meat dishes are brought in, and a waiter arrives with a bottle of red wine that he decants into a carafe, airing it by demonstratively and earnestly sweeping it round in circles with coordinated hip gyrations before filling our glasses.

Cute or comical? I can't decide. How will a restaurant be able to justify scandalous prices for a nice wine that can be purchased for a third of the price in the bar next door if they don't also perform a little ceremony when serving it?

In Kristian's view, corruption in the courts is the

problem holding the economy hostage.

"The courts can be fixed, I'm convinced of it. Georgia has done it, Singapore did it ages ago. What it takes is a raise in salary for judges, a tough crackdown on corrupt judges, and stricter penalties. It's not at all impossible."

According to the ILO estimate for 2018, unemployment is at 1.6 million, which corresponds to just over nine per cent of the workforce. Yet there is also a labour shortage, particularly of skilled craftsmen, who can earn a relatively good 10–15,000 hryvnia a month (equivalent to about 400–700 euro). But many young people prefer to move abroad, where the salaries are much higher. Others stay behind and struggle on.

One day, I take an afternoon trip to Sviatopetrivske, a village south-west of Kyiv to visit Vadim Kuzminski, 45, who lives there with his wife Tanya, 40, and their three children. Vadim sells agricultural material to customers in the neighbouring oblasts. For the past two years, they have been living in an impeccably clean three-room flat, decorated in light colours, in a relatively new block.

"It's quite cramped. My son sleeps on the sofa in the open kitchen, and the girls share one room, and Tanya and I have the other. But it works", he says.

Vadim bought the flat for the equivalent of 30,000 euro, furnished it for 20,000, and the company he works for helped him secure a loan. The fee is about 80 euro a month.

"The interest is what hurts. We pay 19 per cent, but that's low compared to some people."

In 2019, inflation was around 8 per cent, he tells me, dropping to 6.5 per cent at the end of the year.

One reason for the high mortgage interest rates is the lack of a functioning capital flow between the banks. The central bank's base rate is 15.5 per cent and added

to this are the banks' profits. Historically, inflation has been high. During the financial crisis in the 1990s, it was several hundred per cent; in 2015 it was 44 per cent, but now it is clearly heading south.

I ask Vadim if Tanya getting a job one day is on the cards:

"We've talked about it, but I don't think so. We settled down early and wanted a family, and neither of us went to university. Tanya would get so little pay that it'd hardly be worth it once she'd paid for travel and food costs. But she has an active life, she drives and is involved in the church."

Even though the economy is pressuring the family, it is not the most important political issue for Vadim.

"I voted for Poroshenko. He wasn't a populist and campaigned for Ukrainian unity. But generally speaking, I think that politics is too much focused on the economy. National identity and stability are more important. We have to know what Ukraine is and wants to be. Where are we headed? That's one of the causes of the corruption. Many people in authority take backhanders from the Russian lobby since national pride is so weak."

Vadim compares the country to Poland, Hungary, and Czechia, countries with a similar post-Communist past, and regrets that Ukraine has achieved nowhere near their level of development.

"Prosperity there has grown enormously, they're developing, and that's because they feel a sense of loyalty towards their countries. People don't have that in Ukraine, especially in the southern and eastern parts, where the old Soviet mentality lives on. If the country and its economy are to move on, this will have to change."

We drink tea and look out over the plains for a

while. Then I leave Vadim with mixed feelings. A mix of empathy and, well, envy, I guess. Empathy that he has just got on the property ladder based on, from where I'm standing, unreasonable terms. I pay interest that is just over one twentieth of his. And his hopes that the country's politicians will deliver "identity" is an abstraction hard to serve up. But he is driven by a real hope of his family's future and is carried along by an unusual, slightly old-fashioned code of honour, an attitude of resolve, diligence, and modesty.

Corruption is the recurring theme, both in conversations I have with people and in the reports I read on the country. To me, its character is as exotic and mysterious as that nonchalance towards customer needs that I experienced at the station back in 2002.

"There's a charm to Ukraine's chaos. Everything's possible", says Andriy Kruglashov, political consultant and campaign strategist and former activist, coordinator in the grassroots movement Chesno, and one of the founders of the Action Institute.

He has settled himself on the sofa of a Chinese restaurant, smartly dressed in a dark suit and white shirt and a tie that he has now loosened.

"Ukraine is like a solar system in a permanent state of change and fragmentation, where power orbits new planets."

We order our lunches and I ask him to explain the anatomy of the corruption and its constant presence.

"Corruption requires two things: scarcity and gatekeepers. You have to understand that corruption draws its life force from being regarded as a solution. And it has been. We've been living with an inhuman system in which corruption has been a pressure valve or an airbag. The motivation for climbing up the system is

that it provided protection against random violence. A skilled doctor knew that their services were worth more than they were officially paid for, and they could take advantage of that. The patients understood this too. Corruption was a means of surviving respectfully in the system."

Kruglashov holds that the corruption is an alternative control system, in which those with power over the unreasonable system let subordinates break rules.

"And then many of us have a naïve view of corruption. We think that anyone with more money than us are corrupt. But when we ourselves are involved in it, that's 'another thing'. If we see where the money comes from, corruption is instead a practical solution to different problems."

I explain to Andriy Kruglashov that I understand that corruption blossomed after the fall of the Soviet Union, the financial crisis, and the privatisation drive that made millionaires of the elite. Much of what has worked in the country's modernisation is also part of the oligarch epoch. But in that case, corruption should be a rather superficial aspect of society. Or does it have deeper roots?

"I'd say it does, I'm afraid. Take something like offering money and lighting candles for patron saints in the church. We pay the icons to protect us. And we know that the state or the powers that be can't do that. So, it's a deep-seated feeling."

Ukraine also has a tradition of trusting to charity. Kyiv became the Russian Empire's philanthropic centre in 1862, with hospitals, schools, and shelters for the homeless and elderly. 1929 saw the start of a programme to dismantle and forbid these charities. But the state that was to take over their role failed to deliver. Instead,

Ukrainians were attacked on a broad front, both during the 1930s famine and later during Stalin's purges.

Security and survival were up to the individual to somehow patch together according to their ability and by private arrangement. However, Kruglashov sees clear signs of change and of the imminent end of the oligarchic golden age.

"Although it's actually not just about the oligarchs, but about gatekeepers in general. We had a tradition whereby everything that you manage and supervise, you effectively own. In a system without profit or demand-side management, corruption makes it possible for private individuals to generate value for themselves where the system failed to. But now technology is quickly changing society. Getting digital ID documents, buying tickets online, communicating with the authorities via fixed digital systems, social media – all this undermines the power of the gatekeepers."

The control of real capital still confers power on the gatekeepers. But two revolts since 2004 and the elections have changed the playing field.

During the years, Andriy Kruglashov campaigned for honesty and transparency in public administration, the activists would confront MPs with what they considered a common democratic problem – that they voted on parliamentary matters by proxy. As absentees, other people had to press their buttons for them.

"We said that we appreciated the fact that they were doing good things for the country, but we also wanted these things done properly. They often accepted our argument. There is now scope for a dialogue with politicians."

That corruption is a pressing problem is, of course, well-known to the regime. In the autumn of 2019, President Volodymyr Zelensky announced a seven-step

war on corruption involving, for instance, reducing the number of MPs, dealing with absenteeism, and setting up supervisory bodies. The government has also implemented an AI system, dubiously named Big Brother, to chart anomalies in parliamentary voting patterns and to oversee the assets of state officials. In September, an anti-corruption court was also set up. The outcome of all this, however, is far from given. The proclamations by different political leaders promising to crack down on corruption are more an empty ritualistic display than anything that will actually yield results.

I ask Andriy Kruglashov about another strange dimension of corruption, namely that it often consists of ridiculously petty gestures. A customer wanting to grease the processing of a pass, for example, might stick a chocolate cake under the clerk's window. I can understand that large sums of money can entice a poorly paid civil servant to adjust his routines, but why compromise your honour for a chocolate cake?

"Yeah, right, I can see what you mean. But it's a gesture of appreciation and bonding. It's like a tip that confirms your value. Serving an anonymous system hasn't been an honour in itself, so every sign that you're someone with personal value is welcome."

Distances in central Kyiv are not great, and you quickly learn that the choice between taking the underground and walking is decided not by distance but by whether your destination is at such a topographical altitude that reaching it would mean a sweaty uphill trudge. One afternoon of too much going up and down hills, I arrange to have lunch with Mykola Ryabchuk, poet, author, and a doctor of political science. We meet at Musafir, a Crimea Tartar exile restaurant on Khmelnytsky Street. He arrives punctually wearing a grey blazer and a neatly

trimmed beard. Me, I'm perspiring and dressed a little too casually for the occasion.

Ryabchuk was an oppositional intellectual in the 1980s and after independence emerged as one of the country's most influential minds, in part as the editor of the journal Krytyka.

"Before the reforms of *perestroika* took off in the Soviet Union, I was a samizdat writer. It was a time of strict censorship, especially in Ukraine, where Moscow tried to quash all 'Ukrainian bourgeois nationalism'. Thanks to my involvement with samizdat and my contacts with dissidents, I was suspended twice from university. But it was also an exciting time, and as it turned out Ukraine played a key part in the dissolution of the USSR."

He also notes that the role of literature then was much more central than it is today. It was the only institution beyond the official media. Mykola Ryabchuk is often remembered for his conceptual figure from 1992 of a Ukraine as two mutually conflicting identities, one as a colony of Russia and one as a European nation. Others hold that this is too simplified a construct – Ukraine has, if anything, dozens of identities and narratives.

But Ryabchuk takes pains to point out that his dichotomy is not about linguistic or ethnic identities.

"Euromaidan and the Orange Revolution were not about linguistic or purely ethnic identity, but about a broader view of values. That you need to understand. Today, Ukraine has come far in what is really a process of liberation from the mindset of an east-Slavic community towards a European identity and its corresponding values. This also explains Russia's aggression towards us", he says.

In recent years, Ryabchuk has been a clear advocate

for the historical liberation process. But is this process impeccably conducted with a rigour of democratic prudence? During the current war, Ukraine has been accused by various civil rights organisations of gagging the Russian media and the country and of other forms of censorship.

The Russian but oppositional TV channel Dozhd was blocked from the country's cable TV, ostensibly for broadcasting adverts without a licence, sending reporters to Crimea without Kyiv's approval, and describing the peninsula as Russian. Western organisations criticised the move, which Ryabchuk says was misguided. The main problem with the country's media, he explains, is more that a few exceedingly wealthy oligarchs have a dominant influence.

He also thinks that the allegations of censorship and the blocking of Russian media are consequences of the war and cannot be compared to the Communist era, the legacy of which still manifests itself in subversive Russian media campaigns.

"Everyone who knows anything about Ukraine sees that we have a free press. This does not mean that we must accept foreign campaigns bent on destabilising the country", he says.

According to Ryabchuk a longer view must also be taken of media freedom and corruption. The difference between the Yanukovych era, when the media was controlled from above, and the Poroshenko era is a mile wide. Ryabchuk points out that in spite of everything, the oligarchy is accompanied by diversity. Today there is a score of TV channels, all run by different oligarchs.

"Diversity has been established, but the oligarchy has also prevented an institutional and legally protected pluralism to take root. Freedom in Ukraine exists today

despite the will of the ruling elite, not because of it."

He maintains that Ukraine is suspended between three forces, one acting on it from above, one from underneath, and one from the outside: oligarchy, popular mobilisation, and Russian pressure.

"The problem with this circumstance is that democracy constitutes a loose, fictitious narrative that has no stable institutional foundation. From the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth we have inherited and nurtured the notion of freedom and democracy being cardinal values. But on the other hand, we haven't inherited an equally strong value regarding the rule of law, and that's a major problem. We don't recognise the value of rules and procedures", says Mykola Ryabchuk.

For a week in the early autumn of 2019, I stay in a flat in Podil, central Kyiv's liveliest hive of creativity, with its young clientele, old buildings, shops, malls, and boutiques. If you come from central Kyiv's fashionable quarter, the heart of Podil – Kontraktova Square – is best approached by taking a pleasant stroll down the tourist-packed Andriyivskyy Descent, with its abundance of hawkers and bars and its rich Parisian atmosphere. One baking afternoon I've arranged to meet sociologist and researcher Tetiana Kostiuchenko, and since I'm half an hour early I sit down under a cluster of trees that shade part of the large square. Every minute out of the sun must be fully exploited, and I sit down near the statue of Gregoriy Skovoroda, 17th century philosopher and son of a Cossack from eastern Ukraine, one of the cultural luminaries whom Russia and Ukraine both truculently claim as their own. On a dry patch of grass next to me, someone has tossed a smouldering cigarette butt. Why? Why not? What are the chances of the grass catching fire? Probably miniscule. I bet 99 out of 100

times, the dog-end goes out by itself. I stay for a few minutes to check that it stops glowing. It's nothing to get worked up about. No. The chances are probably one in a hundred. If that.

As a sociologist at the nearby and distinguished Kyiv-Mohyla University, Tetiana Kostiuchenko expresses sober optimism towards the state of the nation.

"The police behave. Freedom of expression is established. Diversity has taken root and is appreciated, even though sexism is endemic and sexual minorities face an uphill struggle… But democracy in Ukraine is still incredibly far from mature. The link between freedom and personal responsibility is weak, and this affects everything from learning to sort waste to understanding the inertia of democracy and the conditions under which it operates."

She sees Zelensky's resounding victory and impact as the product of a democracy built on populism.

"The opinion-forming force of social media is aggravating polarisation. I think it's down to laziness. The simpler the ideas, the easier they take hold."

Tetiana Kostiuchenko has researched how the state and capital in Ukraine interacted in the post-millennial epoch of revolutions and seismic power shifts and identified a key challenge:

"Ukraine is governed by an elite of businessmen and politicians that has been established in far-reaching personal networks. And since we have such a weak party structure, they decide how power is exercised."

In her research, Kostiuchenko has charted how these networks have changed over time. During both the Orange Revolution and Euromaidan, when Yanukovych was overthrown and his party collapsed, the structures broke up.

However, she also found that amongst the power players who survived the tumult, often at lower levels, such mutual personal relations remained intact.

"The networks are kept alive through reciprocal trust. That's the cement, not the parties. The politico-business collaboration that characterises the modern Ukrainian elite survives and morphs as long as the individuals are still around. It's not healthy."

So, what does she think it will take to bring about change?

"The most important thing on a macro level is to resist the influence of the oligarchs. At a micro level, we have to nurture greater participation. People will have to learn to take responsibility. Apathy is widespread and must be fought."

During the 2010s, western Europe's political identities suffered a painful reorientation from the left-right dimension to globalism versus nationalism. The Ukrainian landscape is of a different kind, with a nationalism that paradoxically strives to be international.

Does this mean that the left-right dichotomy has had its day? Because what is "left" in Ukraine? Sympathy for industrial labourer honour and an anti-Nazi heritage? What's "right"? Church and capital?

I meet up with Lviv-born poet Vasyl Losynskiy. Apart from writing verse, he is also a cultural activist based in Kyiv.

"Poetry is a narrow field, but once, writers who also wrote in Russian could find a readership in Russia. That possibility is no longer there. So, culture writers have found themselves with a shrunken market. On top of that are the effects of digitalisation."

Now that the printed media is no longer the self-

evident portal to narratives of people's lives and dreams, Vasyl Losynskiy has moved from publishing in print to happenings and events. He himself says that he is involved in what can be called ongoing contemporary criticism, recording situations, subcultures, and historic events.

Politically, he identifies as left-wing. But how is this term to be understood in a country like post-Soviet Ukraine?

"Difficult question", Vasyl admits. "For me, it's about civilisation critique, the pursuit of social justice and standing outside the political system. It's about defending other values, such as representing oppressed minorities, supporting pacifism, and opposing Communism and xenophobia. It's these kinds of thing that I guess you can call 'left wing'."

Vasyl Losynskiy regrets the lack of influential organisations with social ambitions in Ukraine.

"We have, for instance, few effective unions. Socially aware activism is more about garnering publicity regarding individual phenomena such as Holodomor. But politics via organising for rights has a very weak standing. It's the interests of the powerful that carry weight, even though much has improved."

Yes, much is better in the city, despite the financial crisis, its floundering identity and corruption, the war and the riots in which riot police shot and killed demonstrators on its streets.

How to describe Kyiv in the second decade of the 2000s? During a hilly trek after taking my leave of Losynskiy, I fancy I see three faces.

Firstly, the Kyiv of mind-boggling glory. The grand, classical city with a spirit of Russian empire, breath-taking views, domes, monasteries, and monuments.

But also the Kyiv of the fallen empire, a city scarred by 70 years of planned economy. Barely visible in its

central spaces, but take a few steps outside the centre, and the buildings bellow in pain and cry out for some TLC and renovation. And rust, rust, rust everywhere and in a myriad of patterns.

And then there the Kyiv of modernity and globalism. With the young generation rises a city to a fresh identity that is neither post-Soviet-depressed nor pretentiously grandiose. Ukraine's low prices can long make Kyiv, especially Podil, a magnet for the young and creative; a hipster bonanza that has already taken shape with its murals, trendy bars, shopping malls, and clubs.

After anti-corruption activist Andriy Kruglashov and I finished our lunch at the Chinese restaurant in central Kyiv, he leaned back in his sofa and delivered a summary:

"Ukraine swings back and forth. In many respects we're a modern European country – we know what a sensible country has to be like and that corruption doesn't fit into that. There's a tale from Kyrgyzstan about a dragon living in a castle, which must be knocked down before the dragon can be slain. We in Ukraine are quick to stand united against the dragon but have no idea how to demolish the castle. The facades have cracked but the dragon's still inside." Andriy loosened an already loose tie as if there was one more degree of comfort to attain. He looked at the ceiling, as if trying to see the future up there:

"Ukraine is a ponderous giant where everything is in a state of flux and anything is possible. We are somewhere in between madness and something that can turn out really good."

8 CHERNOBYL'S RADIANT FUTURE

There was a gentle breeze that night too, at once gentle and terrifying, you could say, and none yet knew what message it carried as it blew first north and then to the west and east. [...] *But before the wind reached the people, it headed higher over the mountains, as if for fun, and there it blew wild and fresh but still deadly in the night before dropping towards the early hours towards the valley, finally slipping triumphantly towards the roofs and domes of the city.*

– Madeleine Hessérus on Chernobyl in *The Elephant's Foot*, 2016

Along with fifty or so other passengers, I alight from the packed coach for a brief break up by the barriers. After a two-hour ride from Kyiv, we have finally arrived at the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, the over 500-square kilometre area surrounding the site of the 1986 nuclear meltdown. Outside the barriers is a green tank on which a logo has been painted: Chornobyl-tour.com. Behind it is a kiosk selling sweets, coffee, snacks, and a rich assortment of tourist knick-knacks on the disaster

theme: mugs, fridge magnets, tee shirts, and postcards.

Over the years, Chernobyl has attracted growing numbers of visitors from around the world hungry for genuine and unique experiences. Two years before, the zone had 30,000 visitors. In 2018, it was double that number and in 2019, after the Hollywood series on the environmental disaster, over 100,000. Today, the Chernobyl zone, the burial ground of the Soviet Union's high-tech dreams, follows the market logic of the tourist industry. For 100 euro per person, visitors can bring themselves face to face with a continually present, authentic but controlled danger. Geiger counters are distributed (at an extra charge) and the level of radioactivity that each visitor's body receives is noted at the end of the day in a kind of commemorative certificate with an official stamp. There are also yellow protective suits on sale at the entrance. They have no practical function; they just look cool on social media.

The representation of the zone as a completely abandoned industrial landscape is also only partly accurate. The city of Chernobyl is mainly evacuated, but people working in the area still occupy a number of buildings; there are hotels for overnight stays and a few hundred people have returned to their homes in the zone's scattered villages, sometimes in breach of the regulations. Some 3,000 people work in the area. The radioactive particles have sunk into the ground at a rate of a few centimetres a year and now, say the guides, lie at half a metre under the surface. In general, levels of radioactivity in the zone are three or four times greater than normally found in nature, but with spots of higher concentration in places that the tourist guides point out to visitors with habitual ease.

At our first stop by the barriers, we get to stroll around

what was once a rural village, Runya Veresnya, a cluster of small houses with space for animals and a playground with gaily coloured climbing frames. Nature has slowly eaten its way into these homes, which are surrounded by rickety fences, brushwood, shrubs, and trees. Their furnishings bear witness to a simple 1980s Soviet modernity, and their floors are covered with shattered windowpanes and abandoned shoes. On the walls of peeling paint: some pictures, portraits of previous owners, and crumbling 1986 calendars. During a single moment 35 years ago, the life of the village was frozen in a grimace of death that reminds us of the ephemerality of our own lives: one day, the spirit will leave our bodies, and they will lie there, growing cold and livid.

How did the events that led to the evacuation of this vast area start? The official story about the world's worst nuclear disaster actually began in neither the Moscow media nor the communiqués from the Kyiv authorities, but at Radio Uppland – a local Swedish radio station – of all places. When chemist Clifford Robinson arrived at work at the Forsmark nuclear power plant at 7 am on 28 April 1986 and passed through the security gates, he set off the alarm. More than anything else, it was the engineer's shoes that gave the high radioactivity reading. Suspecting a leak, Forsmark promptly evacuated 600 workers from the plant. Radio Uppland reported on the incident that morning, with more Swedish and foreign news channels following suit during the day.

But from Ukraine SSR there was silence. Nothing was to be said before the Party had given the go-ahead to confirm that something had occurred and how it was to be interpreted. Ironically, the cause of the radioactive emission that the international media reported was a safety test to see whether, during an involuntary

shutdown of reactor 4, the turbines could produce enough electricity to run the cooling pumps until the backup generator took over.

The delay between a generator shutdown and the backup generator reaching full power had been identified as a potential safety risk.

This suspicion would prove correct. The reactor was an older Soviet RBMK, in which the power output is stepped up and dampened by movable control rods made of boron with graphite tips and cooled by water pumps. The model was outdated and the gauges unreliable. For instance, the stability of the control rods was registered fifty metres from the control room.

The test had been planned to take place on the night of 25 April 1986. It began with the control room workers reducing the reactor's power. But then word came from the authorities that another power plant had been taken out of service, so to compensate for the power loss, the test was postponed. For the rest of the day, reactor 4 ran on half power, which compromised the stability of the process.

Just before midnight of the 26th, the test resumed. The safety system was disengaged and the control room pulled the output all the way down. Several things then happened. On account of the lower power, the reactor had accumulated Xenon-135, a surplus of the fission by-product that slows the nuclear reaction. The surplus led to an even further reduction in power, which dropped so low that the process became difficult to control. At 1 am the control room staff expressed concerns about the risk of instability. Chief engineer Anatoly Dyatlov decided that the test was to be carried out regardless. All they had to do was grab the controls and turn the power back up.

At 01:19 on 26 April 1986, the decisive phase began. The reactor power was down at seven per cent and

needed to be raised quickly. So Dyatlov ordered an unusually large number of control rods to immediately be extracted from the reactor. This was a departure from the safety regulations, and to do it, they had to bypass the safety features.

With the rods removed, there was a sudden power surge and within minutes the reactor was out of control. The control rods began jumping hysterically up and down and the cooling water that had been pumped into the hot reactor vaporised instantly, causing enough pressure to burst the water pipes. At 01:23, in what was now an emergency, the control room tried to restabilise the system by re-inserting the rods. But the rising temperatures caused them to jam halfway. The cooling pumps malfunctioned and for a few seconds, there was what sounded like a muffled bellowing coming from inside the reactor.

Then an explosion shook the building. A few seconds later, there was another loud boom. The core exploded, the reinforced concrete ceiling split open, lumps of graphite, pipes, and fuel rods flew into the air and landed on the fractured roof and around the site. Cascades of water contaminated with radioactive material spurted out of the reactor building towards an area of woodland a few hundred metres off. A nightmare-like fire took hold of the plant while dust containing caesium, strontium, and other radioactive particles rose like a plume into the sky and started to drift northward in the wind.

The fire service of the nearby city of Pripyat rushed to the scene, but the firemen had neither the resources nor the proper protective equipment to do the job. Party officials and engineers held a crisis meeting to hammer out different strategies and response options. With the nuclear fuel posing a severe threat to the water

table and the Pripyat River, the source of Kyiv's water supply, controlling the narrative was a top priority. The telephone lines from Pripyat were shut down to prevent the spread of rumour and panic. The situation could be used by powers hostile to the Soviet people bent on undermining political unity.

The fire was to rage on for another ten days.

After a disordered 24 hours, the magnitude of the disaster finally dawned on the crisis group. The conventional routines of firefighting, military intervention, and information control were not going to suffice. The incident was something exceptional, an acute danger to the entire region and, possibly, humanity itself. The crisis group contacted the Soviet prime minister Nikolai Ryzhkov, who almost 36 hours after the accident gave the go-ahead for the evacuation, and 115,000 residents of the area were told that they were to be immediately but temporarily removed. Three hours later, at 3.30 pm on the afternoon of 27 April, the last bus rolled out of Pripyat. The prosperous city of optimism stood there, silent and deserted, along with the polished and colourful attractions in its soon-to-open pleasure park.

Witnesses later said that there was something biblical in the whole experience. A people on an exodus from one realm to another. Many turned to the Book of Revelation, in which the end of the world is heralded by seven angels blowing seven trumpets:

> *Then the third angel sounded: And a great star fell from heaven, burning like a torch, and it fell on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water. The name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters became wormwood, and many men died from the water, because it was made bitter.*

Wormwood – the translation of the Russian word Chernobyl, enhancing the impression that the nuclear meltdown was the arrival of the apocalypse as foreseen in the Holy Scriptures.

Around a thousand military reservists were enlisted to clear away radioactive rubble from around and on top of the reactor, a party of them replacing remote-controlled robots that had malfunctioned. On the 27th, helicopters were flown in to drop sand, boron, and clay over the burning building. One of them crashed.

On 1 May 1986, Labour Day was celebrated with the customary parades and flag-waving children in Kyiv. It was not until a fortnight later that General Secretary Gorbachov issued a public statement about the accident. Eventually, almost 400,000 people were to be evacuated from the zone, which even extended beyond the border to Belarus ten kilometres or so away from reactor 4.

When it came to holding people to account, those responsible were dragged to the bar so that scapegoats could be identified in a ritual purging of the system. Those who had betrayed the system's lofty principles were hung out for public exhibition in what was to be one of the very last Soviet show trials.

Outside the city of Chernobyl stands a concrete monument depicting a small team of military firefighters in action. The title – "A monument to those who saved the world" – bespeaks their heroic status. The statue itself is an ungainly concrete assemblage, more a cross between a competent social realist monument and the papier-mâché models that usually emanate from classroom art lessons. I am taken aback, at first, by the way my guide, a highly qualified chemist, seems so moved by it. But rather than the design, what she reads in it is a message that tells not only of fifty fallen

men but also of the 600,000 citizens who served as liquidators, deployed to clean up the zone. Their reward was a medal, pension benefits, and an average of 120 millisieverts of gamma radiation. Due to the emotional stress of their task, many of them also suffered severe posttraumatic symptoms.

How many souls did the accident ultimately claim? The question is both mooted and politicised. The immediate death toll of irradiated and fallen firefighters and engineers was around fifty. The WHO, UN, and IAEA concluded that a total of 4,000 people could have had their lives cut short by Chernobyl. This estimation, however, is famously questionable. Over the 34 years that have passed, data has shown that the health effects of the radioactivity itself were much milder than what had at first been feared. According to Geraldine Thomas, professor of molecular pathology at London's Imperial College (*The Guardian*, 26 April 2011), an increase in thyroid cancer is the only proven radiobiological effect. But by a quarter of a century after the accident, only 15 of 6,000 such cases had ended in death. In 2008, the United Nations Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation published a report stating that there is no scientific evidence of a link between a higher incidence of cancer, mortality, or non-fatal diseases and the radioactivity itself. Nor did the feared increase in leukaemia materialise.

However, epidemiological studies also showed that a great many lives were lost to prolonged psychological damage. Above all, being evacuated and press-ganged into the cleaning up operation caused a national trauma and immeasurable personal grief for the people whose lives had been torn apart. During the following decades, there were some 50,000 premature deaths amongst the

zone's displaced people. In addition to this, according to the International Atomic Energy Agency, there were 100,000 to 200,000 abortions made in Europe after the accident, many of which were performed on account of the professed medical risk that radioactivity posed to the growing foetus.

The area around the Pripyat Rivers has special significance in the history of Ukraine. It was here where the country's oldest dialects emerged, and the regional fens are usually considered the cradle of the east-Slavic tribes that eventually dispersed. In the 1700s, Polish nobles enticed Jews to colonise the city of Chernobyl, which grew into an important Hasidic centre. At the start of the 20th century, Jews comprised one fifth of the city's inhabitants, but during the Second World War, their numbers were halved by Germany's military executioners. Today, many orthodox Jews go on pilgrimage to Chernobyl to light candles and sing psalms in the synagogue in homage to the dead and the city's legacy.

The city of Pripyat, on the other hand, was a new creation, raised as nuclear power expanded in the 1970s a few kilometres north of the site of the fourth reactor. It was a model city for the engineering elite set to harness atomic power for the Soviet people. The city of 50,000 was a modernist exemplar, but this did not stop it from having its fair share of social problems: boat and bicycle thefts, drunken brawls, assaults, murders, and bank robberies. When Gorbachov launched his transparency reforms, discontent with the authorities also rose to the surface in Pripyat. In 1985, a minor riot in the city saw cars overturned in protest. Yet Pripyat was still a city with a skilled population, unusual prosperity, and high salaries. All manners of facilities were available

here: sports arenas, a palace of culture, a concert hall, daycare centres, shops, and libraries. To crown the work, a pleasure park was to be opened on 1 May 1986, complete with a shooting range, dodgem cars, and the Ferris wheel that would become horror tourism's most well-exposed symbol.

Today, brushwood, trees, and shrubs have reclaimed the site, its paving broken apart by tree roots. A birch rises up through the stone steps to the Palace of Culture in scornful mockery of the attempts of human city-building to claim authority over nature. What was once a sports facility has been taken over by pines and willows. The fauna has flourished, and boars, foxes, badgers, and owls are the new lords of the fens, and the population of grey wolves has grown to such an extent that biologists have warned of the risk of mutant wolves infiltrating other areas. And after reintroduction, wild horses also graze the meadows.

The daycare centre in the village of Kopachi makes for one of the day's eeriest sights, a dark, derelict place littered with dusty dolls, toys, and empty, rusting beds. The environment is straight out of a horror film and cries out to be described in detail. But I demur. The narrative has something too orchestrated about it, something that has become too much of a guided tour for foreigners. And the dolls in the different houses in the zone appear to me a little too numerous and too consciously arranged for the suspicion not to nag that they have gradually been placed there by obliging prop managers. Maybe I'm being insensitive, cynical; maybe I've played too many computer games in post-apocalyptic settings to quell the feeling that Chernobyl has been modelled on these rather than vice versa. Or maybe there is something about the commercial exploitation

of today's experience-hungry society that obstructs the genuine sorrow that inhabits the environment.

In all events, the zone is far from bereft of human presence nowadays. Gradually it has been refilled by civilisational intention. During the clean-up years, several new transport routes were laid. The battle against the isotopes eventually took on the character of a kind of civil war, in which the liquidators cleansed surfaces with soap and water and buried contaminated machinery. All of this required investments in new roads and logistics.

Since 1986, the zone has been infested with looters. Already in the early weeks of the disaster, people broke into flats occupied by party bigwigs and bosses. When they had plundered these, they took to pilfering machines, metals, and other material that could be sold, often still contaminated. When Ukraine's economy collapsed after independence, the acute poverty of the 1990s heralded a new, larger wave of looting, with scavengers ending up stealing copper cables and other fixed infrastructural products.

Just a few kilometres from reactor 4 is a canteen serving tray lunches, where tourists and workers congregate around the tables in one common hubbub. And half a year after my visit to Chernobyl, the actual control room in reactor 4 was also opened to paid, short-term visitors keen on experiencing the heart of darkness – where the levels of radioactivity can still be 40,000 times above normal.

Nuclear power had its day in the area and a park for solar energy has symbolically been established in the zone instead. In an attempt to exploit an alcohol market constantly thirsting for unique mental spices, an entrepreneur has been distilling vodka from local grain.

And President Zelenskiy has talked of lifting the Chernobyl brand. With tourist revenue equivalent to 10 million euro a year (2019), he held a speech this year launching plans to establish green corridors and radioactivity-free footpaths. It's enough to make one suspect that a misery park for large-scale tourism is not far on the horizon.

An expression of creative pragmatism or cynicism? It's a matter of taste, of course.

But at least the passage of time has been resurrected in the zone. From a social perspective, Chernobyl is still a source of energy that, above all, vivifies the corpse of a deformed ideology. Communism was a modernist delusion the global successes of which during the 1900s can seem hard to comprehend. But they had a very logical explanation. The Communist movement had asked the right questions, identified the right problems: inequality, ruthless exploitation, colonialism, and the rapid development of industrial capitalism. And with this, a poverty transferred from family, clan, and communities to towns and cities with no graspable sense of unity.

To all this, Communism had a morally splendid response and a useless solution.

The grand global experiment carried on for 72 years, until 1989.

Could it be said that the centralist culture of silence was blown sky high when the reactor detonated and spread radioactivity around parts of Europe and shame around the USSR?

It is a nice conceptual image, and to some extent relevant in Ukraine, but capitalist Russia has proved itself ready and willing to handle similar disasters in a way that is less transparent than during Gorbachov's

time. As late as August 2019, reports came of six deaths at a missile testing site in Archangelsk, where the Russian authorities hid the circumstances from the outside world by, amongst other measures, closing radiation measurement centres and serving the world's media with reassuring messages. (Laurén, Anna-Lena, *Dagens Nyheter*, 2019)

Can one then see Chernobyl as a necessary consequence of Soviet dysfunctionality? Such an explanation might seem ideologically attractive, but by that token should Fukushima also not be seen as a symbol of capitalist failure?

Michail Gorbachov, the former party leader, has claimed that Chernobyl and its aftermath were what brought the USSR down. The main reason, he has claimed, is that the clean-up operation drained so many economic resources and so much energy that they were unable to keep up the arms race with the USA. This, however, should be taken with a large bucket of iodised salt, as it is a convenient way for Gorbachov to blame the collapse of the Soviet Union on an unforeseen incident beyond his responsibility. In fact, the transparency that he launched in the USSR constituted a normalisation and a democratisation that eventually proved incompatible with Communist centralism. It is not unlikely that the story of Chernobyl, had it happened under Josef Stalin's watch, would have been hushed up and instead of the mass evacuation, life in Pripyat would have carried on as normal after a cursory wash-down of the worst affected areas, the distribution of iodine tablets, and a few apposite executions of overly outspoken experts.

Maybe this is exactly what has happened. In Lake Karachay in the Urals, large quantities of radioactive material were released over a ten-year period from 1951

to 1962 on a scale 24 times greater than Chernobyl. This disaster is largely unheard of (Persson, p. 40).

Here, too, people close to the nearby city of Chelyabinsk, where nuclear waste was stored and where the cooling system malfunctioned, had to be evacuated, 11,000 people in all.

Chernobyl was less a cause of the Soviet Union's collapse than a symbol of this fact, which the perestroika and glasnost of the 1980s had already heralded. By 1986, the USSR had become very much part of the rest of the world. The delayed evacuation order was mainly down to the initial denial of the local leaders, but in the new Soviet Union, the TV news was able to broadcast films of the helicopter firefighting operation. When a fire started in reactor 2 in 1991, it was closed for good; in 1996, reactor 1 was decommissioned on account of inferior technology; and finally, after a series of international negotiations, reactor 3 was closed down in December 2000.

The narrative struggle. Yes. The term must be seized upon to understand our mediatised times and the rules of play it operates under. And when it comes to the story of Chernobyl, it is likely that it will be understood and interpreted through the lens of the 2019 TV series written by Craig Mazin and directed by Johan Renck – the former Swedish rapper who performed under the stage name Stakka Bo.

But what truths did this prizewinning series lay down? Generally speaking, it can be said to be about the moral awakening of a Communist bigwig and his qualms over an environmental disaster and some scientists' fight for truth in a mendacious system.

That Chernobyl takes dramatic liberties in the detail is perhaps not problematic for the historiography itself,

even if they at times are turbo-chargedly irritating. Like the ridiculous fabrication of letting the miners who dug out the ground beneath the reactor before casting a huge concrete slab work entirely naked (why would a team of workers take off their underpants to cool themselves down?).

The docudrama takes liberties, but also establishes a narrative that the world will remember. Party official Shcherbina is depicted as a brutal party gangster, forever on the verge of threatening murder, who gradually undergoes a moral epiphany. New Yorker magazine's Soviet-born Masha Gessen (4 April 2019) was one of few critics of this portrayal, her objection being that whereas the actual Soviet condition was defined by resignation and implicit threats, the TV series had the party bosses engage in carousing gangsterism and colourful confrontations, which in her mind crossed the line into falsehood. Hollywood's Chernobyl was a huge hit and was praised for its characterisation and its eye for detail, but its telling for TV was gaudy and brutal, the reality low-key, oxygen-depleted, poor. The story of Chernobyl is still political dynamite. In Russia, the characterisation of Soviet bungling was considered an insult. The production of an alternative Russian Chernobyl film was soon announced. There would be no capitulation to the Western narrative.

Chernobyl was proof of the uselessness of the societal narrative in a relaxed Soviet society, the shortcomings of which had long been all too evident. A joke did the rounds in the country: How many kolkhoz workers does it take to milk a cow? Twenty. Four to hold the teats and 16 to pump the legs. It was a pithy picture of the workings of a planned economy, whose helpless decline into apathy was met by general stoic equanimity. The

Chernobyl disaster, both the technological and the communicative, threw a sudden international spotlight onto the dimness of lethargy. It was also the spark that ignited a wave of civil activism, a belief in the power of individual initiative and popular movements to change society. After the accident, environmental activists in Ukraine organised protests that drew tens of thousands of demonstrators. These movements then morphed into organisations with wider demands regarding democratic and systemic change.

When we finish our lunch, we stroll around the deserted city of Pripyat, where the slow decay of the housing blocks makes them more dangerous to explore by the year. Mould on the walls has been replaced by moss, cobwebs, and birds' nests, while creepers replace the fading wallpaper patterns. Flakes of ceiling paint and rustling leaves carpet the floors, the stone slabs and wooden boards of which have succumbed to the most vigorous trees. Deer and boar roam rooms and stairwells between dusk and dawn, and in their faeces grow flowers that the rays of the sun nourish in the spring.

So, what does Chernobyl symbolise? Is this a ridiculous question? Is it even possible to paint an overall picture that explains why it concerns us? Here, it seems to me that three separate narratives appear.

The first one is about the backwardness and duplicity of the Communist system that ended in nuclear catastrophe. Chernobyl as the burial ground of the horrors and futility of the Communist system is a story that can also be tethered to the belief in nuclear power as a valuable source of energy.

The second is about the dangers of nuclear power itself and its potential to contaminate vast areas of land and render them uninhabitable for centuries.

It is not unlike a modern version of the Icarian myth about mankind's drive to constantly fly higher until our arrogance takes us too close to the sun and melts the wax of our wings to send us plummeting to our death into the sea.

The third story is possibly the most emotive; it is the one told by the buildings of the zone about the transience of society. Our civilisation is a thousand-year history centred on the urban norm, with its concentration, order, predictability, and protective walls, roofs, and streets. The zone's expansive environments are a unique reminder of what remains when humans have disappeared and nature has taken over. It is a timely story that points forward to today's environmental threats and corona pandemics that seem to catch us by surprise. The sight of this dystopian landscape has something consoling about it, a reminder of the ephemeral nature of our individual lives and of civilisation. Just like Joseph Gandy's and Gustave Doré's 19th century illustrations, Pripyat embodies a tale that can alleviate our desperate desire for fleeting accomplishment, status, and wealth.

There are, then, multiple morals to the Chernobyl story – or myths, if you will – on state Communism, on nuclear energy, on modernity and perhaps on Ukraine's role as the permanent punch bag during all manners of grandiose super power experiments. As we drive away from the zone's dystopic representation, I want to stay for a story in the margin on the symbolism that the evacuation holds for Ukraine in the 2020s. When the residents were herded into rusty buses back in May 1986, it was the beginning of a journey, an evacuation that is symbolically still happening, towards Europe, towards new, more honest, and human attitudes, and

with a sense of people's ability to renovate society from the bottom up.

On the way back from today's excursion, all visitors are screened for radioactivity. The coach passes the zone's barriers and we alight for a break before the return to Kyiv. I exchange some hryvnia for a bright green, luminous condom and a fridge magnet of a gas-masked liquidator as a souvenir. The driver then starts the engine and with slight discomposure, I leave the site of history's worst nuclear disaster.

Ukraine deserves every single coin it can milk from it.

9 LVIV: A LIVING ROOM IN EUROPE

Arriving in Lviv in western Ukraine feels like stepping into a well-furnished living room in a wealthy aunt's townhouse. Standing proud in the centre is the opera house, an oversized gateau that marks the entrance of a long plaza framed by the parallel highways of Svobody [Liberty] Avenue. Here stands a classical plinthed statue of the Polish national poet Adam Mickiewicz and a short walk away the larger, modern Shevchenko monument. East of this scene is the city's older parts, where the nightlife buzzes around statues and memorials with Rynok [Market] Square the uncontested focal point. It is easy to understand why the city is called eastern Europe's Paris – enjoyable at a third of the price. Its central European character and architectural abundance give Lviv a kind of charming showiness. I've arranged a meeting with Tamara Zlobina, doctor of philosophy, art critic, and editor of equality website "Gender in Detail", and ask her to describe the difference between Kyiv and her home city.

"People in Lviv are more conservative, both on the inside and the outside. Here, working class men can also wear suit trousers and fancy shoes and women like to walk around in skirts and heels. Very bourgeois. This

also applies to the attitudes, especially in academia, and the spread of ideas about emancipation. Kyiv somehow feels more modern, freer of mind and lifeways."

"I think it has a lot to do with the Greek-Catholic dominance in Lviv. Yet there's also a small-scale entrepreneurial culture that's stronger than in other parts of the country, a more palpable European-ish civil society", says Tamara Zlobina.

Lviv and the surrounding Galicia are Ukraine's western borderland and its gateway to Europe, if you will. German author Lutz Kleveman has described the city as "the forgotten heart of Europe" that history has consigned to the continent's mental margins. The city, which today boasts a population of 720,000, took form during the various Polish, Polish-Lithuanian, and Habsburg periods of rule. From the mid-14th century, once the Mongols had withdrawn, the Ruthenian kingdom was swallowed up by Poland. Then, for almost 150 years from the 1770s to the end of the First World War, Lviv was part of the Habsburg empire. It was then Polish again until 1939, when the region was incorporated into the Soviet Union. This means that Lviv was Soviet for only just over half a century, which explains why it has retained a character of pomp, homeliness, and small-scale neatness in equal measure.

At the same time, Tamara Zlobina says that the civil, slightly petty-bourgeois Lviv, like the rest of Ukraine, still lives under the image of the strong leader and of uniform Power, with a capital P, visibly cast as one piece. This, she thinks, is also evident in the elections.

"The percentage of people who went out to vote in the 2019 presidential election eclipsed that of the parliamentary election a few months previously. The president is seen as something of a tsar, the one we hope

will fix everything for us. The value of the parliament is vaguer.

"Then there is this notion of monolithic power. I attended a meeting in 2014 for NGO activists in Berlin, where Ukrainians asked about the Germans' take on local 'power'. The Germans didn't understand the question, what powerholders were being referred to – local politicians, director generals, or big corporations?

"We're not used to these things being different. In Ukraine, local politicians aren't independent and are controlled by central politicians or tied up with oligarchs. Such structures, of course, are not interested in cooperating with NGO activists."

But Tamara Zlobina still thinks that the situation has gradually improved:

"At the turn of the millennium, during the Kuchma era, the president would issue writing manuals for the media. Yanukovych tried to do the same but was forced to back down. Today, it's not even on the cards", she says.

What do the people of Lviv think about the legacy left on the city by great powers from different points of the compass? She ponders the question before answering.

"People's view of Poland is generally negative. This is because of Poland's nationalist stance during the world wars, when Ukrainians were persecuted and imprisoned. Poland has always coveted Galicia. The view of Austria-Hungary is different. More nostalgic, since their rule was more liberal, or perhaps I should say multicultural and permissive. And then there's the Soviet Union. Well…it has left much damage and tragedy in its wake and functionally no one thinks highly of it, and we do what we can to cast off the burdensome legacy of the Communist era."

On my first day in the city, I visit the Lubomirski Palace on Rynok Square. Built in 1760 for the Polish prince Stanislaw Lubomirski, it was taken over by the local Austrian governor as his residence already in 1771. As I enter the show halls on the second floor, I am intercepted by a female museum warder who delivers a harangue I don't understand. She then points to a kind of shoe cover, but as I try to wrap them over my boat shoes she starts to protest. Nemaye! Ne zovni! Not outside the shoes! It's then I realise that they are a kind of slipper. The incident is telling in all its triviality. The palace is mainly visited by foreign tourists in their daily hundreds, perhaps thousands. And yet the warders utter not a single word of German or English. How hard can it be to learn the words "shoe" and "sock" in English? With three additional words – "No", "Only", and "Please" – they could achieve eight hours of friction-free communication with the torrent of tourists.

"Yep, that's the Communist legacy for you", says Tamara Zlobina when I tell her the story. Visitors are seen as strangers, not as customers. Staff manage and defend their territory by upholding rules. Some things are in the bones. But the problem is not unknown and there are now programmes in place to ensure that Lviv's service culture improves."

However, Tamara Zlobina recognises another side to the Soviet legacy:

"Paradoxically, there are also Soviet features that are distinctly modern and of our time. Like that the class differences aren't so set in stone here. We have different classes, of course, but they're not built on inherited wealth, and there's a kind of basic equality, mobility, and openness between the different social strata."

The part played by Galicia itself in Ukraine is slightly

paradoxical, it being a part of the country with genuine cultural traditions as well as an 1800s oil boom.

That said, the area remained economically undeveloped. Galicia's oil fields were found at the end of the 1800s but despite the fact that over 50 refineries were active here in the early 20th century, industrialisation lagged behind the country's eastern regions. Lviv's population multiplied from 50,000 to 200,000 between 1870 and 1910, but in the coal and steel towns of eastern Ukraine, demographic growth could be upwards of a thousand per cent. Galicia's oil deposits also proved rather paltry, and with the chaos of the First World War, the sector shrank. Industry was transferred to the rapidly growing east, where prestige investments were being made in universities, taking the future with it. The country's lowest average pay is actually found in Ternopil, a little to the east of Lviv, while the highest is found in Kyiv and some cities in eastern Ukraine.

I spend a few evenings strolling around Lviv, ticking off sights large and small.

An otherwise respectable bookshop carries a bounteous display of sadomasochism books, the reason being that Lviv was the birthplace of author Leopold Ritter von Sacher-Masoch, a man who – admittedly involuntarily – lent his name to this particular sexual preference. I pass a restaurant on the square where a small group of curious people stand outside peering in. Inside, prospective diners have themselves whipped by the staff to the delight of other guests.

As for the literary gentleman Sacher-Masoch, he had himself tortured in Austria, where he eventually settled.

On one summer evening, Lviv is a carnival of fun and games: ladies in provocative clothing beckon passers-by into strip clubs on Rynok Square; airgun firing ranges

offer effigies of Putin to snipe at; the streets resound with the music of the buskers' guitars and fiddles; and, yes, you can even take a crash course in twerking. Eastern European twerking – a more apt symbol of the dominance of the global village would be harder to find. This city's spirit of impatient modernity, appealing yet a little insipid, thins out with age and distance from the thrum of the city, but in Lviv the reference points are global: the music, the celebrities, the dances, the digital platforms, the restaurant trends, the tee-shirt motifs, and the sports.

The urban, sparkling Lviv has existed for a long time closer to dance steps than the steppes.

When I sit down at a restaurant table and order a beer, the waiter asks me where I come from.

"Sweden? That is a nice country. You do not have our problems."

"Well, yes and no", I reply. "We're also in a state of crisis. A crisis of identity. There's a lot of discontent around."

I refrain from explaining that despite Sweden's healthy economy, working infrastructure, and solid democratic institutions, populism and doubt about where the country is headed have increased. In many ways, polarisation feels greater in Sweden than it does in a Ukraine that despite all the misery, discontent, low income, nebulous national identity, and general wheezing nevertheless seems to unite around a desire for greater democracy, the rule of law, and reform.

"But life is good in Sweden", the waiter insists. "You are a rich country. That is good."

"Yes, but having wealth can be less pleasurable than striving for it."

"Anyway, I hope you are rich", he smiles.

"Well, doing my best, old chap", I reply and raise my glass with a suave smile. A gesture of self-assured status rooted in Western prominence. It feels good, the facts notwithstanding.

I take pleasure where I can.

And my smug grin is not without justification. According to the 2019 World Happiness Report, the Nordic countries and a few other nations in north-west Europe are the continent's happiest, taking into account social factors like health, corruption, and financial status.

Finland ranks the highest, while Europe's unhappiest country is – yes, you've guessed it –

Ukraine.

But while the World Happiness Report notes that discontent (or the lack of happiness) seems high in Ukraine, which, one might venture to suggest, has something to do with the war, public faith in the future is even higher. In the 2019 Pew Research Center survey, Ukraine tops a dozen European countries when it comes to people's belief that their children will be better off financially than they are. And when the 2020 World Happiness Report was published, Ukraine had climbed eleven places from 134 to 123 out of a total of 154 countries. In 2013, however, before the outbreak of war, it was at 87.

It is sometimes said that Ukraine has few national heroes. The point of the assertion is unclear – after all, a country can have as many heroes as it likes. Perhaps it is that Ukraine is such a young country that it has not had time to establish many key figures, or that it has a tendency to recycle, with disturbing frequency, a bunch of well-known characters. Statues abound of such heroes as Vladimir the Great, who Christianised the Kyivan

Rus' in the 10th century, and Yaroslav the Wise, the last great Kyivan Rus' ruler. We also find Cossack leaders Khmelnytsky and Mazepa along with sundry cultural luminaries, such as historian and statesman Mykhailo Hrushevsky, the prolific turn-of-the-century author Ivan Franko, the female poet Lesya Ukrainka and, of course, the pioneer of the Ukrainian language, Taras Shevchenko, who since the 1990s has also taken pride of place in central Lviv – and possibly Symon Petliura, who led the independence campaign against the Germans and Bolsheviks after the First World War but whose troops, in defiance of his orders, sullied their reputation by engaging in post-war pogroms. National heroes also include the military liquidators and firefighters from Chernobyl and soldiers who fell in the Second World War.

On the side of the Allies, I should add.

A cynosure of Lviv's local firmament is Danylo Halytsky, who ruled (the Ruthenian) kingdom of Galicia-Volhynia in the 13th century, when the Mongols reigned over the steppes and advanced on Europe. King Danylo has become a symbol of Galicia's early history and military conquests against Poles and Hungarians and the creation of the kingdom that stretched north and east of Lviv. However, autonomy during the Halytskian 13th century was relative. Having been resisted by Kyiv's leaders, the Mongols ravaged and burned the city, which remained in impoverished limbo for centuries. When the Mongols knocked on the gates of Lviv a few years later in 1246, Danylo Halytsky opted to compromise, to subjugate himself to the aggressors, and dutifully pay tax. The Mongols' golden army was conquering and wealth-generating but not proselytising, and local leaders were often free to practise their customs and worship their gods. Lviv was allowed to retain a kind of

stability and internal autonomy. King Danylo (crowned in 1253) tried to forge alliances in Europe against the Mongols, but his efforts were largely in vain.

The city was also named after Danylo's son Leo (Lviv means "lion"), which various tribes adapted over the ages to their own nomenclatural preferences. The first name was Lvihorod (Lion City). Then in the 1340s, the Poles conquered the city and named it Lwów, as it is still called in Poland. On the partition of Poland in 1772, the Habsburgs dubbed the capital of its northernmost province Lemberg. The Jews often said Lemberk or Lemberik, and the Russian have always stuck to Lvov.

A democratic country is usually defined by its ability to tolerate dissenting opinions. The fact that Ukraine is an ostentatious and young country also creates space for a variety of public narratives. Tolerance towards the dubious morals of its national heroes also seems much greater here than in the rest of Europe. If we step back for a moment and consider our continent, defined through 20th century experiences: What acts would disqualify a high-profile politician from being elevated to a hero in Europe? Well, leading an organisation that effected a ministerial assassination, proclaimed an ethnic cleansing project, and massacred Jews and Poles would be a reasonable suggestion.

In Ukraine, such a curriculum vitae would be no obstacle.

Amongst Lviv's statues of national heroes is a large monument to a man who was heroified during the 2000s: Stepan Bandera, the Lviv born-and-bred leader of the far-right Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists.

The statue of Stepan Bandera, staring proudly into the distance, stands in front of a kind of rectangular, quadrapodic triumphal arch on a street in Lviv that

also bears his name. Bandera joined the OUN in 1929 at the age of 20, principally to engage in the struggle for independence against Poland and the USSR.

Above all, it was the Poles for whom the Ukrainian nationalists had the evil eye. They were the inheritors of foreign supremacy, not the then more remote Russians. In the summer of 1943, the OUN-UPA (the Ukrainian Insurgent Army) participated in the mass-killing of between 70,000 and 200,000 Poles in areas of western Ukraine and what is now south-eastern Poland, in a campaign that the Polish government designated as a genocide in 2016 and that remains a hotbed of distrust between the countries to this day.

The Germans advanced eastward in 1941 on the hunt for raw materials, a manoeuvre that the OUN hoped would have Ukraine established as a friendly brotherland. However, the Nazis had nothing but contempt for the Ukrainians, and the Third Reich headquarters was rife with all manner of witticisms about how the Ukrainians were to be dealt with: "All Ukrainian men over 15 should be executed and our SS studs sent in instead", quipped one Nazi leader.

When the OUN had a Ukrainian state proclaimed on 29 June 1941, the Germans promptly removed Bandera and some of his key aides from Lviv. Initially he ended up in prison, but was soon transferred to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp, and once he was released, he was forbidden to leave Berlin. The OUN's dreams of independence were swiftly dashed. And when the Nazis rolled into Lviv, the extermination of the Jews commenced. In the Nazi account of the war in Ukraine, the murder of Jews was described as the eradication of Bolsheviks, Communism being seen as some kind of Jewish plot. The executions took place in

the local Janowska concentration camp, in the Belzec extermination camp in eastern Poland, or following isolation and starvation in local ghettos. Liquidations were also often effected by gathering up people and shooting them on the spot. Most notorious is the mass-killing in northern Kyiv, where for two days in September – over the Jewish festival of Yom Kippur – a Sonderkommando, aided by the Ukrainian police, executed more than 30,000 Jews and dumped their bodies in a mass grave in Babi Yar. During the Second World War, the Nazi regime engaged some 13,000 Ukrainians for mopping-up actions at home and as camp guards in Poland, some having been pressed into slavery. But there were also very willing collaborators amongst the Ukrainians, and the extent to which Ukrainians are to be seen as victims or perpetrators during the occupation is a controversial and infected issue.

After the battle of Kursk in the summer of 1943, the Soviets began to reclaim Ukraine, and by the time Lviv was taken in July 1944, many of the country's Jews had lost their lives. The entry of the Soviets would be hard to describe as a liberation. Between 1944 and 1946, 180,000 Ukrainians were deported to Siberia and other central Soviet regions over accusations of collaboration with the Nazis.

And of the Jewish lives extinguished during the Holocaust, one in six – a million people –

were Ukrainian.

The scale of Ukrainian fatalities during the Second World War is hard to take in. Seven million Ukrainian deaths. The number is too staggering, the butchery too ruthless. The fascist Stepan Bandera, who remained in Germany and died in Munich in 1959, must be seen as a deplorable choice of national hero. The OUN had

precociously proclaimed open war against Ukraine's Jewish population, which it saw as the support troops of the Bolshevik regime. In 1941, the nationalists purged 7,000 Jews in Lviv. But the point of the organisation's blade was also pointed at the Poles, and between 1943 and 1945, Bandera's arm of the OUN had around 70,000–100, 000 Poles executed in Volhynia and eastern Galicia.

One might ask why this peculiar antisemitism has been such a stubborn presence in the country at different points in its history? The 1880s, 1918–1919, and 1941 are some of the years in more modern times when waves of killings have swept over the ethnic community. Jews have lived in Ukraine ever since Greek colonists settled along the coast of the Black Sea. From the latter half of the 1500s and into the following century, growing numbers migrated from Poland, employed by Polish landowners to develop urban economies with their time-honoured entrepreneurship. In western Ukraine above all, they worked as brokers, tradesmen, collectors of tax and tributes to the Polish crown, or as directors of restaurants and mills. For many peasants they therefore came to symbolise the urban cash economy, with its duties, profits, interests, and general state power. They served as businessmen and managers, a middle stratum beneath the elite, and at times of social discontent represented an easy target. When a particular social class overlaps significantly with a particular ethnicity, the risk increases that revolts against the former are equated with attacks on the latter. Inflamed by their hatred of state henchmen, people lash out against the group they take to be their agents.

In recent years, Ukraine's relationship with its Jews has provided a convenient instrument of all manner of propaganda. For those embracing socialist rhetoric

or holding Russian sympathies, Bandera is proof that Ukraine's struggle for independence is driven by thinly veiled far-right and racist forces in a hibernating OUN and its armed wing, the UPA – both of which are intimately bound up with blistering antisemitism. For pro-West nationalists in general, antisemitism is a closed chapter in the nation's history. Stepan Bandera's eventual incarceration in a Nazi prison and concentration camp, where he sat during the worst of the OUN pogroms, proves that he is primarily to be seen as a champion of Ukrainian liberation fighting three superior armies of occupation. To more ardent nationalists, Bandera's nationalism is the guiding thread to liberation from Moscow, and if the Jews stand in the way of this, it shows that they are still serving, as they were then, the cause of Bolshevik imperialism.

In 2010, Bandera was officially designated a national hero by the departing president Viktor Yushchenko, a decision that was invalidated by the Supreme Court a few months later on the grounds that Bandera had not been a Ukrainian citizen. In 2007, the huge Bandera monument was unveiled in Lviv and today, his statue stands in over a dozen other Ukrainian cities; there are also streets and squares named after the OUN leader. As recently as 2019, the Ukrainian parliament Verkhovna Rada voted to declare Bandera's birthday, 1 January, a national holiday. In the country's eastern parts, he is regarded with much greater scepticism.

Well, what can you say? That in a country with a dearth of national heroes you have to make do with what you've got, perhaps? Or that for the lonely, your enemy's enemy is your best friend. Author Mykola Riabchuk grew up in Lviv and I ask him what he thinks about Bandera being placed on a pedestal. Is that not

grist to the mill for those who seek to present the country's national ambitions as marinated in far-right extremism?

"I prefer not to focus on such matters during the war we currently find ourselves in. But to me, there are two Banderas, one the leader of an underground terrorist group and proponent of the then popular fascist ideology, the other the Ukrainian patriot who fought for the country's independence and liberation from colonial oppression. I condemn the former but embrace the latter."

But could the same thing then be said about Stalin in his fight with Nazi Germany?

"Stalin was a player who wielded ultimate political power on the world stage. Bandera represented the start of something that did not yet exist. The OUN set up no concentration camps and had zero chance of victory. It was a national sacrifice to a lost cause."

Riabchuk argues that the country's national symbols must be examined in light of its relationship to the USSR.

"Take Shevchenko, our national writer. The Bolsheviks managed to turn him to their own ideological needs, redefining him as a kind of Soviet peasant hero, a supporter of the future revolution and Soviet camaraderie. Yet still he couldn't be honoured here without official permission and surveillance. People were expelled from university in Ukraine when they tried to place flowers by Shevchenko monuments to commemorate his birthday. The oppression was heavier here than in Moscow, where you were free to borrow Nietzsche and Freud in the libraries.

Riabchuk informs me that in Ukraine, people did not even have access to Soviet books published in the 1920s

as they were considered insufficiently orthodox.

"The system was on a constant witch-hunt in Ukraine, by which I mean the ghosts of 'bourgeois nationalism'. You have to take this into account too", says Riabchuk, who repudiates the associations between Ukrainian nationalism and far-right extremism.

"There is no mass far-right movement in Ukraine. The extremists in Svoboda failed to get above the threshold in the last election. All Ukrainian parties try to stay mainstream, as only this can win them votes at a national level."

Is there then a prominent streak of antisemitism in today's Ukraine? The nationalists, including paramilitary groups, are allowed to hold marches in Kyiv. And then there is the Azov Battalion, a volunteer military group with its roots in Nazism and the violent ultras of football club Metalist Kharkiv.

This paramilitary group is allowed to operate as part of Ukraine's national guard and has attracted volunteers from other countries, such as Swedish security consultant Mikael Skillt. The battalion nurtures an ideological narrative that more than lives up to the allegations that are usually thrown at Ukraine's nationalists. When Britain's The Guardian visited the Azov Battalion in Mariupol during the mobilisation against Russia's invasion of Crimea a few years ago, one of its soldiers explained that he had nothing against Russian nationalists per se, only that Putin was not a true-blooded Russian, but a Jew.

Alex Voronov, who grew up in Ukraine but today writes editorials for the local Swedish newspaper *Eskilstuna-Kuriren*, has long kept a watchful eye on the country. I ask him for his views on the Azov Battalion.

"Sure, there's no doubting that it originated in a white

supremacy environment. But not everyone who joined Azov had that background. I'm thinking of Mykola Berezovyi, local Horlivka politician for the centre-right Batkivshchyna (Fatherland) party and director of a trolley bus operator. He was killed in Ilovaisk. It would be bad if his memory was associated with Nazism.

"So, I still see the battalion as heroes anyway. They played a key role in liberating and then defending the city of Mariupol in 2014 and 2015, and I think they should be credited for that. Naturally, I don't want to give everyone in the regiment carte blanche for everything they do alongside their war efforts. But without the Azov Battalion, the consequences for eastern Ukraine would have been much worse."

In its 18-country ranking of antisemitic sentiments that the Anti-Defamation League published in November 2019, Ukraine came in third place behind Poland and South Africa with 46 per cent of the population holding antisemitic views. By comparison, the figure in Sweden is four per cent – putting it at the top (well, bottom) of the class!

On the other hand, according to the (few) Ukrainian Jews with whom I discussed the matter, antisemitism is not a problem. A colleague in Kharkiv said that antisemitism is alien to his home city, where many Jews sit on its governing bodies, such as mayor Hennadiy Kernes (who died of covid-19 symptoms in December 2020) and the oligarch/politician Aleksander Feldman. In Kryvyi Rih, Dima Ambrosov denied, as a Jew, ever having problems with antisemitism. In early 2020, the country's Jewish-descended president Zelensky also maintained that antisemitism was all in the past, a non-issue.

The fact that leading artists, politicians, and oligarchs have Jewish roots admittedly does suggest that the

flames of antisemitism are not burning as fiercely as they once did in Ukraine. But one problem in evaluating the extent of antisemitism in modern Ukraine is that the mass-killing of Jews has accompanied that of Poles or Ukrainians in general. Ethnic cleansing has been a by-product of what, with increasing frequency, is held aloft as the country's proud legacy of defiance.

It still appears difficult to make things add up, however. Attitudinal surveys indicating that Ukraine is riddled with antisemitism – and the reality in Ukraine, where Jews are an uncontroversial part of the country's elite. On reflection, though, maybe it is not at all strange. Ukraine quite simply has not changed since the 1500s. The rural population turns its suspicious eyes to the country's urban intellectuals and financial elites, and its countless Jews, while in the cities, ethnic diversity and a large proportion of prominent Jews is just as timelessly self-evident as it is uncomplicated.

But its history is what it is, and the urban Jewish cultural legacy has slowly faded. Ever fewer people define themselves as Jews in modern Ukraine and in the CIA's estimation, the proportion has declined from almost one per cent of the population to the current 0.2. Most Jews have become assimilated into the majority. In the early 1900s, Jews made up a third of Lviv's population; today there are just a few thousand left. The Poles have also vanished from Ukraine's gateway to Europe. With splendour and charm, Lviv has blossomed as a Ukrainian and global city. But with the polishing of the city's bronze statues, the spirit of bygone times, with the dynamism generated by the interaction of its Jewish, Soviet, and Polish legacies, has also been wiped away.

10 POLTAVA, KARL XII, AND MAZEPA

Poltava, June 2019: absurdly, I can clearly hear traffic through the trees. It can't be more than a hundred or so metres away. Two hundred at most. It's not like I'm lost in the Amazon rainforest, but the situation is still disconcerting. From the one-time battleground a few kilometres north of Poltava, I walked down to the obelisk that was erected at the site of redoubt number 8 and took a shortcut through an area of woodland to number 3. It was here that, come the dawn of 28 June 1709, the Swedish campaign against the Russian tsar met an early and decisive setback.

But before I know it, my shortcut has turned into something else – a maze of increasingly tangled brambles. Strange banks, rising tall and straight, and sudden pits amongst the trees block my way. The vegetation grows denser, ensnares me, forces me to turn back. A recoiling branch then strikes me in the face, and I rub my stinging cheek. I step on with firmer resolve. A few minutes later I stumble into a hole almost as deep as my knees.

I stand there still, feeling like a fool. Who has dug pits in these woods? Are they Carolean graves? Something from the Second World War?

Returning the same way is out of the question. I have followed my nose in a winding south-easterly direction and there is no path to find my way back to – just thick undergrowth and these weird earthworks. I step out. Insects are running riot under my shirt. Wherever I look: thorns, nettles, scrub, and thin, sinuous branches.

I pick up my pace in a determined attempt to leave the trees. This is a mistake. I fall again into another hole, deeper this time. Badly scrape my shin. I groan, swear, and palpate.

No, nothing broken, nothing sprained.

I get up and struggle on. Sticky in the 28-degree heat, I start to hum nervously to keep my rising panic in check. If I break a leg and can't drag myself out, no one will hear me. One comfort is that I won't be the only Swede to have met his end on these fields north of Poltava.

In the year 1700, Karl (Charles) XII was the ruler of a Sweden that had grown into a European great power. But the Great Northern War was looming. Denmark, Saxony-Poland, and Russia attacked different Swedish possessions around the Baltic. During the year, Karl XII's troops fought with Danish, Saxon, and Polish forces, and at the end of November attacked the Russians who were laying siege to the Swedish fortification at Narva in Estonia. With a snowy wind in its back, the Swedish army sent off 37,000 Russian soldiers with an efficiency that would resound throughout the continent. The warrior king's tactical ingenuity became the stuff of legend, and the military project continued. During the Polish campaign of 1704, Karl XII also managed to take Lemberg (Lviv), a task that had bested many other military leaders before him.

The king's advance with 60,000 men on Moscow in 1708 would prove more of a challenge, however. The

tsar's forces retreated, and the Swedes found themselves facing scorched earth and biting cold that claimed an ever-greater number of infantry and cavalry lives. A Russian classic. Let the climate, distance, and terrain do the dirty work. Thus had many an invading army been ground down. But Karl XII was not going to let the tsar get away with it. Regroup! The heart of darkness was to be attacked from the south. Karl XII embarked on a year-long circumventing march through East Prussia, Poland, and onward towards the east in search of one final decisive showdown with the tsar. But his opponent did not come to confront him.

The winter was bleak.

In the spring of 1709, there were fewer than 20,000 soldiers left in the Swedish army. It boded ill, of course. But in the previous July, only 12,500 Caroleans had managed to defeat almost 40,000 Russian troops in Holowczyn in what is now Belarus. In central Ukraine, there was also a new ally in the form of Ivan Mazepa's Cossacks, eager to take on Peter the Great. In the south, the Crimean Tatars could probably also be mobilised. And progress was being made by the advancing, village-burning, marching Caroleans.

In March 1709, they were joined by between 3,000 and 4,000 Cossacks, and in May Karl XII arrived in the city of Poltava, to which he promptly laid siege. Finally, the tsar's army arrived. They set up camp by the Vorskla River a few kilometres north of the city and erected a series of fortifications, redoubts, ready to break up attacking forces. The moment of truth was approaching.

18,000 Swedes plus Cossacks faced 50,000 Russians. For a Viking, it was child's play.

Wasn't it?

I've brushed off the insects, taken a deep breath,

buttoned my shirt to the top and must now forge ahead and out of the woods. But I need a strategy. No circumventing the trees, that will no longer lead me in the right direction. I now force my way through the undergrowth, metre by metre, making a beeline for the field to the north-west from where I came. The branches are more impenetrable than ever, but I am now watching every step, paying attention to everything that might be a pit. I push my way along, wading through nettles, bending aside canes, avoiding only the thorns.

And when things are looking their gloomiest, the light suddenly opens onto the field ahead of me. I struggle on and step out into the sunshine where paths and roads stretch out under the afternoon light, open and welcoming. A hundred metres to the north-west runs a parallel path along which a woman strolls with a pram.

Yeah. I'm a pathetic figure.

The following day, 27 June 2019, is the 310th anniversary of the Battle of Poltava. When I arrive at the site of the main battle, a small procession of a score of people troop out of the war museum led by a woman with a large bouquet and three men dressed as soldiers: a Carolean in blue, a Cossack in white, and a Russian in red. The Russian and the "Swede" step up to the monument to lay flowers at its stylish Swedish inscription: Time heals wounds.

Clever thinking. But not all wounds. Wounds, though. At least the scratches on my face.

A woman from the museum gives a talk on the legacy of history and I listen with a straight back, applauding at all the right places. It is a strange experience to stand beneath solemn Swedish words carved in stone in a group of people amongst whom I am the only Swedish speaker.

Peter the Great, or Tsar Peter I as he is known in

these parts, stands upon a stubby plinth outside the war museum by the battleground. Since 2009, there has also been a statue of Mazepa in the city centre.

There is a pleasant, well-ordered air to Poltava. My first visit here in the summer of 2002 was before the internet, Airbnb, and sushi. We arrived in the evening and asked a taxi driver for tips on where we might stay. He drove us to a peasant woman living on an impoverished farm. Babushka and husband went out to sleep in the car in exchange for a little rent. At dusk, mosquitoes attacked in an untiring swarm and in the stifling heat, we wrapped ourselves in blankets so that only our mouths were exposed, tongues moistening bone-dry lips and gasping for air. The persistent insects kept us awake until sunrise when they suddenly retreated, leaving us to a dreamless slumber.

The following evening we strolled along the main street and fell into conversation with some new friends at a Georgian restaurant. The mood was upbeat, the vodka flowed, and a Georgian man insisted on finding out if we were circumcised. In the escalating drunkenness and noise, we never ascertained if this was a good or a bad thing. At any rate, it was important.

Babushka's family might still be living in their cottage, and in that case most likely under identical conditions. But the youth hostel in which I have now ended up is brand new and part of a modern infrastructure that has been rolled out in the country since independence. I discover that the Georgian restaurant is still where it was in 2002, but that the street it stands on has changed its name from October Street (Zhovtneva) to Conciliatory Street (Sobornosti) and the parallel Lenin Street is now called Cathedral Street. The street on which the youth hostel is located was once named after

the Bolshevik Michail Frunze, but its signs now say Europe Street.

IKEA has now established a presence in Ukraine, but long before it came furniture store Jysk, which has 32 branches around the country. Many flat owners have taken the Danes to their hearts. The heavy Russian and Byzantine style with its thick curtains and dark gaudiness has given way to pared-back Scandinavianism, with its light, neutral colours and furniture with imitation oak melamine laminate. The youth hostel itself is the most exclusive I have ever stayed in. A considerate receptionist, a friendly atmosphere in the kitchen, my own room with an en suite toilet and bathroom fitted out with perfectly white terry cloth towels and a paper seal around the toilet seat, and finally, to top it all off, a piece of chocolate on the pillow.

Poltava is still a vibrant city, the central streets of which radiate out from the circular Corpus Park. It has a population of around 29,000, mainly Ukrainian speakers, and even the concrete suburb in which I initially considered staying possessed an atmosphere of benevolence and insouciance. In the surrounding oblast are two large iron ore mines owned by the Swiss company Ferrexpo. But production has shrunk over the years and with it the chic city, which has lost ten per cent of its population since the new millennium.

The city centre is home to a sleepless, youthful nightlife. Sobornosti Street is filled with the scent of vapes, hookahs, and espresso cafés, while hip-hop music throbs from clubs and bars. A new infrastructure is forming around new restaurants, many of which are neighbours to derelict buildings awaiting a visible, wealthy owner. The city's building projects are legion, and close to the Vorskla River rise tower blocks built by

Turkish capitalists.

Fester and future, side by side.

The history of the battle of Poltava can be seen as a triangle drama between three armies. The rulers of two great powers and the Cossack leader Ivan Mazepa, whom the history books often ascribe the role of proud rebel leader from the untamed steppes. This is not altogether correct. According to the mythology, he had a relationship with the wife of a Polish noble and when it was discovered, he was lashed naked to the back of a horse and expelled to the steppes by the Pole's henchmen. One can just imagine this dramatic ride eastward from perfidious civilisation to eastern origin, hooves clattering in the night to the strains of a languid bandura. After this incident Mazepa is said to have been reunited with the freedom-hungry Cossacks, whom he later went on to lead in the struggle for national independence.

It is a full-blooded story of potency, passion, and revenge. In fact, Ivan Mazepa was a well-to-do traditional Polish diplomat, lettered, widely travelled, and linguistically talented. He was born in 1639 into a distinguished Polish-Lithuanian family and educated first in Kyiv before attending Jesuit school in Warsaw, where he became the king's chamberlain. Mazepa travelled around western Europe and studied artillery in Holland. He eventually moved to the Cossack capital of Baturyn in northern Ukraine, rose up the ranks and handled diplomatic dealings with the Crimean Khanate and Tsarist Russia. The Cossack kingdom was bisected by the Dnieper and there was frequent internecine strife. The Cossacks had shifting loyalties, for and against Poland, Russia, and Crimea, and in the resulting mess, Mazepa's diplomatic skills were extremely valuable. On

one of his missions in Moscow, he made the acquaintance of Tsar Peter and earned his confidence. In 1687 he was elected, with Moscow's support, hetman of the Cossacks on the eastern side of the Dnieper (the left bank). He tried through diverse manoeuvres and pitched battles to strengthen Cossack autonomy, but above all he made sure to demonstrate loyalty to Tsar Peter – mainly, we might reasonably imagine, for strategic reasons. Poland was the arch-enemy. Himself, Ivan Mazepa was hardly some wild rebel on horseback, but a plump, well-situated power broker. During his more than two decades as Cossack leader, he also became one of Europe's largest estate owners. The portrait of the warlike rebel on the Ukrainian 10 hryvnia note is of a scarred he-man, a poor match with the later Mazepa portraits depicting a corpulent landed magnate and statesman seemingly more suited to a life at a desk and conferences in his palace in Baturyn.

So, why did Mazepa side with the Swedish conqueror against Tsar Peter in 1708–09? The reasons were many. For one, the Swedish king was a luminary figure whose army had won a spate of victories in northern Europe for years. As a vassal state of the successful and remote country of Sweden, the Cossacks would probably have greater autonomy than under Moscow.

For another, there was discontent with tsarist policy. According to the alliance between Tsar Peter and Mazepa, the Cossacks would be under the tsar's protection. But in practice, the Cossacks had been conscripted to various pitched battles or recruited into hard labour in Russia.

When the Swedish king and his Polish allies approached the Cossack state, the situation came to a head. Mazepa requested military support from the

north, but instead the tsar ordered Mazepa to burn villages and towns in Karl XII's path. Faced with the possibility of strengthening his state and attaining independence, Mazepa entered into an alliance with Karl XII at the end of October 1708 and come the following spring joined the Caroleans. Other Cossacks demurred and pitched their tents with the tsar.

The line-up at Poltava on 27 June 1709 looked grim for Karl XII and his allies.

The Russians almost outnumbered them two to one and had superior artillery.

The Caroleans were short of gunpowder and much of what they had was damp.

A stifling heat wave had settled over the area and when eating and sleeping, the soldiers were tormented by swarms of fat, black flies.

Hetman Mazepa was meant to supply the Swedes not only with men but also with supplies and war materiel, but the latter had been purloined by the Russians when they attacked Baturyn and butchered its entire population.

Karl XII had also been counting on the support of Turkey and the Crimea Khanate. But that, too, came to nought.

And then, of course, there was the fact that Karl XII was shot in the foot while on a reconnaissance mission in Poltava, which prevented him from taking an active part in the fighting. Instead, he had to be carted around on a stretcher.

'Tis but a scratch!

It was still the best army that Sweden had ever had. They had God on their side and were swept along by the conviction that they were better organised than the Muscovites and superior practitioners of the art of offensive war.

The Swedes had planned to launch their attack just before dawn, the idea being for the army to pass between two areas of woodland and neutralise a string of Russian redoubts, to then boldly attack the main encampment in the north-west. Shock, lightning attacks and victory would favour the bold.

However, the start of the attack was delayed when the cavalry lost its way. Dawn approached and the Russians had spotted suspicions movements in the south. A few shots were fired and the element of surprise was lost. The Swedes attacked at four o'clock. The first two redoubts were taken according to plan. It was at the third that things went awry.

Historian Peter Englund describes the attack in his book *Poltava*:

> *The battalions [of Närke-Värmlanders] stormed towards the large redoubt. The air was rent with the roar of musket and cannon. The bastion vomited projectiles. Through the smoke and fire the men reached the ditch and the edging chevaux-de-frise was hurled aside. The battalion welled down into the ditch. There, the avalanche of men met a solid wall of bullets and pelting rubble, dashed against it and was washed away. The Närke men recoiled in confused order. At the same moment the lone battalion of Smålanders comprising the Jönköping regiment, sent in to reinforce them also attacked the redoubt. The fleeing men met the advancing and collided: the way forward for the Smålanders was barred.* (Englund, p. 99)

Redoubt number three resisted and the onslaught continued under an increasing lack of coordination. The

lightning attack devolved into disorganisation, fleeing Caroleans, and maimed bodies. What was to be a swiftly executed side show became a massacre that sucked in ever greater numbers of troops. Some Swedish commanders had not grasped the importance of quickly joining the main attack force against the Russians and stayed behind at the redoubts instead.

At this point, the Russian general Alexander Menshikov started to dispatch cavalry from the main encampment against the Swedes. The battle intensified, with cavalry, sharpshooters, infantry, artillery, and the clashing of swords. Gunpowder smoke, bodies, and confusion covered the plains.

By five o'clock, the Swedish troops had nonetheless managed to advance past the redoubts and forced the Russians to retreat. But the losses were all but Pyrrhic. By six, the Swedes were missing a third of their infantry, some having fled, others lying in a tangle of corpses on the battlefields. In what was meant to be the main battle, ten Swedish infantry battalions now faced 42 Russian. What was then commanded by the king was nothing short of a suicide mission.

"They were to be sacrificed for the sake of the Swedish state's duties, for the aristocracy's vast Baltic estates, for the merchant capitalists' fat profits. Their lives were like water. The time was about a quarter to ten and the encounter was unavoidable."[1]

Blue-clad soldiers advanced on the encampment, and the Russians beat a tactical retreat. But almost

1 This passage does not appear in the English translation of the book. Instead, Englund writes: "Lewenhaupt was not particularly sanguine. He later used these words to describe his assignment: 'Advancing with these, as one might say, poor innocent sheep to sacrificial slaughter, must I go to attack the whole infantry of the enemy.' The time was a quarter to ten. The encounter was unavoidable."

directly the Russian cavalry advanced, skirted the Swedish infantry's left flank and attacked them from behind. Swedish cavalry came to their rescue in a counterattack. At this point, in a confusion of foot soldiers squeezed between Swedish and Russian cavalry and after devastating losses, the Swedes' will to fight deserted them. The troops on the left flank turned and fled in panic and the battle line broke. This was followed by retreat and protracted butchery. In the Yakuvetskiy forest, Caroleans wandered about in an attempt to move south and regroup.

A total of 8,300 men fell that day, a mere 1,300 of them Russians. Of Karl XII's 19,700-strong Swedish army, the 12,800 survivors were left to make their way back south along the Vorskla. Three days later, the Russian cavalry caught up with the Swedes, who capitulated and in the king's absence, field commander General Adam Ludwig Lewenhaupt signed the Surrender at Perevolochna. 3,000 prisoners of war were taken to the east in a capitulation that is commonly regarded as heralding the end of the Swedish empire.

The king himself managed to escape with a small military contingent to a Turkish area in the south.

So Mazepa's alliance with Karl XII dashed his dreams of a strong, autonomous state south of western Russia. As so often in Ukrainian history, it led to subjugation under a powerful foreign nation. The Battle of Poltava was also an event into which different groups could mould their own histories.

For Russia, Peter the Great's victory sealed its importance as a great power. In Moscow, Mazepa was seen as the epitome of a traitor and the tsar instituted a Judas Order contemptuously dedicated just to him. A curse ritual was enacted by priests who dragged a

Mazepa effigy through the city before scorching it with torches in a church.

For Sweden, Poltava eventually became a history lesson, so remote in time and space that it posed no threat to the Sweden that came to prefer interesting failures to bombastic tales of heroism. For Sweden, the battle is mostly remembered as a turning point in the war and the end of Sweden as a dominant European state. A historian once pithily described Sweden – with its population of only one and a half million – as a mighty tree with shallow roots. Its crown was impressive, but its trunk fellable by the slightest breeze.

For Ukraine, Poltava was a loss, yet nonetheless a celebrated dream of courage and the idea of a development that should have ended differently, in redress. According to Ukrainian historian Yaroslav Hrytsak, the Cossack narrative constitutes the merging of two cardinal ideas about national identity – one a struggle against foreign rule, the other a struggle against social subordination. This social-cum-national trope is vital to the understanding of modern Ukraine, he reasons. It is the story of the oppressed and their longing for redress against their overlords, wrapped in a story of a combative rebel army taking on foreign rulers.

Ten days after the battle, the tsar's troops caught up with fleeing Cossacks and Caroleans on Ottoman territory by the river Bug. For the Zaporizhian Cossacks, there was no surrender document to be signed and no mercy. Those who had not yet crossed the river were surrounded by the Russians and cut down, one by one.

During his exile in Turkish lands, Karl XII tried to rule Sweden from a distance. After the Skirmish at Bender in which the Turks tried to kick out the valiant military commander, he returned to Scandinavia in

1713 for a few more years of military failures, while his enemies in the south mustered. Sweden's imperial ambitions and the war came to a decisive end in 1721, and Russia became the indubitable leader of Slavic eastern Europe.

For Ukraine's hero-rebel Ivan Mazepa, Poltava marked the end of his time as Cossack hetman. He had also managed to make his way to Bender after the battles of 1709 – but died that same year.

Ukraine's fate was ever thus. Perhaps this is how its national anthem is to be interpreted: "Yet have Ukraine's glory and freedom not perished". They never give up – but are forever being trampled into the dirt by whatever potentate happens to be thundering through the steppes that day.

11 UZHHOROD – THE ETHNIC BREW

After the night train from Kyiv had trundled on for twelve hours, we descend one morning down the Carpathians and out onto the lowlands along Ukraine's western rim. The train swings round a few hundred metres from the Hungarian border before we leisurely squeal into Uzhhorod.

I find myself in one of Ukraine's least typical cities – compact, small-scale, a little old-fashioned as if a slice of central Europe has been cut out and plonked onto the edge of Ukraine's plate. The Transcarpathia region, Karpattya Oblast, is the only mountainous part of Ukraine, a massif that blocks off Romania in the south and swings in towards Slovakia in the north-west. Uzhhorod is 30 km from Hungary and just a short walk from the border with Slovakia. A little further north, the region borders Poland and in the south Romania. Transcarpathia has been viewed from many quarters as a hidden hinterland, sunken behind the mountains to the Ukrainian, in a remote east to the Hungarian or Slovak.

My temporary accommodation is in a Soviet-built, concrete tower block estate, just south of the heart of the city, complete with two wrecked cars in a courtyard shaded by tall trees between the buildings. Should I

find it charmingly permissive? Or deplore the lack of behavioural and institutional wherewithal to remove dumped cars within a reasonable space of time?

I do some strolling around the liminal parts of the city where city imperceptibly morphs into countryside. The further I go from the centre, the more the gardens become smallholdings, with more hens, and eventually farms. The centre of Uzhhorod has a small-town pleasantness balanced between carefreeness and characterlessness, with a generous helping of shops and bronze statues gracing facades and bridges. The classic central European café culture has given way to trendily furnished but anonymous global coffee houses. Towering over the city is the palace, erected in the 14th century by the French-Hungarian knight Filip Druget, with its unobstructed view of hostile intruders from all directions. These days, however, no invading Mongolian armies are seen galloping forth in the distance.

Instead, what threatens the region is the ongoing exile.

Today, Ukrainians, or Ruthenians, make up the city's majority, but there are also Hungarians, Jews, Romani, Romanians, and Slovaks. The formation of the Ukrainian identity is a work in progress, but nowhere is the notion of national affiliation more fluid than in Uzhhorod.

I've arranged a meeting with Bandy Sholtes, local author and cultural activist, who meets me by the pedestrian bridge that spans the river and binds the city's social life.

"Sorry I'm late", he says. "I was up until four this morning and I am a bit hungover. In the summer, we party every night as all our friends who work abroad come home."

Bandy Sholtes is around forty, with a beard and sticky-up hair, who's as quick-witted as he is gap-toothed. He's

wearing chequered shorts, red trainers, and a blue home-printed tee-shirt bearing the legend: The my Englisch is bed. He is stopped by a young woman who wants to buy his latest book, which he obligingly signs on the bridge.

During the 1990s he lived abroad, and since having returned to his home city, he has written books on subcultures, life in exile, and his feelings about his origins.

We stroll down some central pedestrianised streets before sitting down in a restaurant.

"My family's language is Hungarian, but I wrote my books in Ukrainian. It feels more natural", he explains and then excuses himself.

"Can you hang on for ten minutes? I've just been offered some weed by an old friend who I recently bumped into. He's waiting outside. I'll be right back."

Summer and the good things in life. I've got a beer and Wi-Fi. Who's complaining?

Uzhhorod's role as a floating trophy in a disputed borderland during the 1900s has no precedent in Europe.

With the brief exception of the ravages of the 13th century, when the city was burnt to the ground by the Mongol hordes, Uzhhorod, or Ungvár as it was known then, had belonged to Hungary since the 900s. In 1876, the dual monarchy of Austria-Hungary was proclaimed, and Transcarpathia along with large swathes of western Ukraine fell under its domains. After the First World War, the empire collapsed and in 1919, after a short-lived attempt to establish an autonomous Ruthenian state, Uzhhorod was driven into the arms of Czechoslovakia. In the interbellum, parts of the northern bank of the Uzh were developed, giving the city a new, tighter character.

Two decades later, the playing field was shifted again.

For a brief moment just before the outbreak of the Second World War and a shift in the power balance – on 15 March 1939 – the Ruthenians made a fresh attempt to declare an independent Carpatho-Ukrainian republic.

Independence lasted 24 hours until the Hungarians marched into Transcarpathia and retook the city with Hitler's blessing. Bloody purges in Uzhhorod ensued.

After the end of the war in 1945, the USSR took over the region and reshaped it along conventionally austere Soviet lines.

Forty-five years later – in 1991 – the city became part of an independent Ukraine.

"My grandfather lived in the same place his entire life but changed nationality five times. He was born in Austria-Hungary, became a Czechoslovakian citizen after the Great War, then a Hungarian citizen during World War Two, and Soviet citizen after that and finally died as a Ukrainian. And all this without setting foot out of his home city. This is unique. Normally you change country when you move, here all you have to do is to stay put. It's a cheap way of getting to see new countries", says Bandy Sholtes.

As a resident of Uzhhorod, nationality is subordinate to the question of one's relationship to the city and its legal system and economy. Nationality, which in western Europe in the 2010s made a comeback as emotionally charged identity, is for many with a Transcarpathian worldview a nebulous, fluid phenomenon and nothing upon which to hang your identity.

"As for ethnicity, it's not a big conflictive issue here", says Bandy Sholtes. "We're so mixed and have a tradition of living with different groups in Uzhhorod. "Or rather, it is a bit with the Romani. They often live outside society with social problems and criminality. I

was robbed of cash myself after an evening DJ-ing. But I only had myself to blame, in a way, as I got paid in cash, which I flashed about and then this guy followed me home that night. He was much bigger than me so when he took the cash out of my pocket and ran off, I didn't take up the chase."

The question of language and cultural legacy, however, is a more sensitive one. In the 2000s, the region opposed centrally tabled motions to establish Ukrainian as the only official language in schools. The people of Karpattya Oblast were thus an aberration on the decade's electoral map, appearing more akin in their voting patterns to the denizens of eastern Ukraine's Russophone cities. Former president Poroshenko's rallying cry – "Language. Faith. Army." – was here met with scepticism.

"The language issue is important", says Bandy Sholtes. "The Hungarian heritage has been diluted. I speak Ukrainian with my friends, Russian with my wife but Hungarian with my son, parents, and a few relatives. Hungarian gives me a broader view of things and has helped me become acquainted with cultural phenomena that would otherwise be inaccessible to me", he explains.

Bandy Sholtes takes a swig of his beer and wonders if ethnicity is a greater problem in countries that are unaccustomed to diversity.

"Maybe the conflicts get more bitter if you've got two dominant groups. Here, there are so many of all kinds", he says.

Another reason why the multicultural Uzhhorod is not being torn apart by ethnic strife is that the region rides on a shared and familiar contemporary narrative, which, like in the rest of Ukraine, is about years of coming to

terms with its Soviet legacy and reaching out to the EU.

Since 2017, Ukrainians have been able to travel to western Europe without a visa. It was then that President Petro Poroshenko met his Slovakian counterpart Andrei Kiska at the Uzhhorod border crossing to jointly welcome the tearing up of the "paper curtain" that separated Ukraine from the EU.

The draw of the West has grown steadily stronger. While it has bled competence and initiative from Transcarpathia, it is also an important source of revenue for the country as large sums of money are sent home to close and extended families. Sixty per cent of the migrant workers abroad say that they one day want to return home, and when they do, it will have to be with capital to invest. Contrary to what one might think, labour migration into Hungary shot up during the latter half of the 2010s, and over half of it was Ukrainian.

Yet some foreign investors have also started to peer beyond the country's eastern border, where wages are lower and the level of education is rising. Rozivka, a district to the south of Uzhhorod, for instance, is home to US-owned electronics manufacturer Jabil Circuit, which will soon have close to 4,000 employees.

I thought I had come to a Hungarian-speaking city, but during my first walk around Uzhhorod I hear, to my surprise, barely a word of Hungarian on the streets. 150,000 ethnic Hungarians live in Transcarpathia. In the early 1900s, 80 per cent of the city's population was ethnic Hungarian, but after waves of emigration, just under three quarters are now ethnic Ukrainians, or members of the group who during different epochs of rule have been called Ruthenians, Rusnaks, or Rusyns.

The marked attenuation of ethnic diversity reflects Ukraine as a whole. Romanians, Jews, Bulgarians,

Hungarians, Belarusians, and Poles each make up less than one per cent of the population. The country's demographic profile as a whole is dominated by ethnic Ukrainians (77.5 per cent) followed by Russians (17.5 per cent).

But does ethnicity matter these days? Well, yes, our need for at least a collective identity is deep-rooted. It can give life greater meaning than personal projects or nuclear families, and the need increases in times of threat, occupation, or foreign suppression. At the same time, nationality is just one of many possible identities. An identity that revolves around a city, a province, a continent, or a religion can be at least as useful. And national classifications can pertain to diverse phenomena, from the narrow, formal citizenship of a state to ethnicity (which encompasses customs and language), to culture with its values and norms, to origins in terms of the family's biological or cultural roots. Collective identities are another way for other people to understand us, our impetuses, our customs, and our worldview. Where do you actually come from? Before asking that question, one should define the meaning of the word "actually" – actually.

Andy Warhol, arguably the 20th century's most pioneering pop artist, was asked during his hectic celebrity life in the 1960s and 70s New York where he came from.

In an environment where everyone came from somewhere else, the question was commonplace.

He usually just gave a curt reply: "Nowhere". I come from nowhere.

Warhol's parents had emigrated to the industrial city of Pittsburgh in the United States, where they made a humble life for themselves. But they had roots as Ruthenians, or more specifically as ethnic Lemkos,

from the city of Miková in north-east Slovakia, close to the Polish border.

It was where nowhere was.

Warhol's reply was wonderful in its unvarnished modernity. But also comprehensible. Who in those restless days of the US would know what a Ruthenian was? Or a Lemko? What, come to that, is Slovakia? It is the same as Slovenia, or is it Slavonia? Incidentally, when Warhol was alive, there was no separate state of Slovakia, Ukraine, or any Ruthenia.

Give me a minute. Let us try to sort this out:

A Ruthenian, or Rusyn, can, broadly interpreted, be someone with origins in the former Kyivan Rus' culture, who speaks an east-Slavic language and either has a Russian Orthodox or a Catholic Orthodox Christian tradition. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* has an even broader definition: Ruthenians, Rusyns, or Rusnaks became differentiated into Belarusians, Ukrainians, and Carpatho-Rusyns. A similar but slightly tighter definition confines their identity to western Ukraine and Belarus.

The Swedish Academy, however, writes that Ruthenians are a Ukrainian people living in areas in other countries, in which case they are identified through their language and religion. They can also have a local or regional sub-identity, such as the highland peoples Lemkos, Boykos, or Hutsuls.

Many of those who see themselves as Ruthenians define their identity more narrowly, as a separate nationality with its roots in the Carpathians, a highland culture distinct from the rest of Ukraine.

The Lemkos, who originated in Transcarpathia, came to cultivate their own dialect and lifeways in the Carpathians on the border between Poland and Slovakia.

For a few months in 1918–1919, they even declared a short-lived separate Lemko-Rusyn state with the intention to be joined with Russia – before Poland gelded the project after 16 months. How many Ruthenians are there today? It is impossible to say. Paul Robert Magosci, professor of Ukrainian studies at Toronto University, believes that the ethnic group can comprise 1.2 million people living around eastern Europe. However, if you aggregate the different countries' official definitions, that number drops to below 100,000.

As will be clear by now, the Ruthenian identity is hard to pin down, chopped to pieces as it has been over the centuries and marginalised to separate highland areas.

The formal definitions provide only a fragmentary understanding. The meaning of the concept fluctuates among three interpretations: a west-Ukrainian-Belarusian linguistic, community-based identity, an exile identity with ties to Ukraine, and a cross-border affiliation with a historical mountain culture around the Carpathians (and therefore also in Ukraine). But perhaps the term "Ruthenian" really has a function that is not strictly formal, but that is used to sift out a kind of Ukrainian ethnicity from a nationality. Ruthenian ethnicity would then denote something both more deeply based in history and more precise than the broader concept of Ukrainian nationality.

All countries and states are constructions that pen different groups into large areas and decide that they belong together within certain geographical and legislative boundaries. Neither nationality nor language needs to follow these boundaries. A language is a dialect with an army, as some linguists like to say. It is precisely here that the Ruthenians have a history to fall back on, for during the 14th century era of the Lithuanian

Grand Duchy, Ruthenian was the kingdom's official administrative language.

But the linguistic Ruthenian identity is today like writing in the sand. And whoever searches for a correct, established, transcribed Latin character spelling of the name of the city by the river Uzh will easily become frustrated. On Google Maps alone there are two variants, Uzhhorod and Uzjhorod. There is another spelling Uzhorod, but the most common is the first variant, Uzhhorod.

In the evening, Bandy Sholtes gets together with some of his summer-homecoming friends down by the river. We drink beer and talk about Europe. Tanya, one of them, lives with her husband in Switzerland and works at a hotel.

"The pay is good, of course, and we're happy there. At the start of the summer, my parents also came to visit. They were impressed by life in Switzerland. The recycling and the green way of thinking and how everything just works and is clean. Stuff like that we're not used to", she explains in her melodious German.

"Even if you don't work in the West, I think it's worth visiting. It makes you see how things are to be done properly."

Her words embarrass me slightly. Coming from western Europe automatically endows you with a kind of authority. It's in the West where people know how to do things "right".

But is her view a strength or a weakness? Well, I'd say the jury is still out on that one. According to a Pew Research Center survey that asked the citizens of different countries if they saw their own culture as superior to others, the eastern European peoples are generally more inclined to answer in the affirmative to

the question than those in the West. As for the western European countries, the numbers are all over the place. Perhaps the answers depend on which neighbours they compare themselves to. Norway tops the Western list with 58 per cent. Lowest in Europe is Spain with 20 per cent and, yes, Sweden with 26.

In Russia and Rumania, 69 per cent answer in the affirmative, in Poland and the Czech Republic, 55 per cent.

Ukraine is at the bottom of the entire former eastern bloc, with only 41 per cent of its citizens thinking that its culture is superior to others.

But even if low national self-esteem could be seen as a tendency to resign, it is an expression of modesty and a readiness for change and development – exactly what Tanya talks about.

The idea that the homeland of Ukraine is, well, generally muddled can facilitate adaptation abroad. The notion probably also operates on a macro level too. Countries that have cultivated a national self-image as unique and superior can find it more difficult to integrate themselves in international communities from which they would otherwise benefit.

For eleven centuries, Ukraine has been forced to adjust to the terms dictated by realpolitik and bullying neighbouring superpowers. Its low national self-image hides a sympathetic pragmatism and the seed of an ability to create a more sensible future, collectively and unconditionally.

I borrow a bike one day to cycle home to the EU. The closest pedestrian border crossing to Slovakia is only 10 km away.

The road passes through a string of villages and in those lying closest to Uzhhorod, old hovels have given way to ostentatious edifices to impress Uzhhorod's

new generation of entrepreneurs. As I ride, I find that it is not Slovakia that emerges ever distinctly from the environment, but Hungary. It is outside the city that the Hungarian community has survived. I exchange a few Hungarian pleasantries in a shop, whose manager promptly laments the war against Russia and Putin.

My trip to Uzhhorod did, therefore, not lead to a Hungarian city surrounded by Ukrainian mountain people but vice versa – to a Ukrainian city surrounded by a Hungarian countryside.

My bike ride to Slovakia is a pleasant one. The branches of the fruit trees depend under the weight of the plums, cherries, and apples that all seem ripe on this late summer's day and I stop several times to partake of their bounty. Beyond the fields the Carpathians rise up in the distance. At the junction by the fruit-laden trees lie plastic lids, bags, tins, a wheel, and a dead cat.

At the border in the village of Mali Selmentsi, the Ukrainian side is abuzz with trade. Slovaks come here on Sunday raids to purchase cheap drink, tobacco, clothes, and toys. The border crossing is meticulous, with inspections, the presentation of passports, and a short queue with a stamp in their passports for entry into the EU. Once in Slovakia, the milieu becomes at once a little stricter, more proper, and without the commerce and hubbub of the Ukrainian side. I make a symbolic phone call to Sweden at domestic rates, order a beer, and cycle aimlessly around the church and the rest of the village.

I then cross back over the border and pedal back through the villages to Uzhhorod.

I have arranged a meeting for the next day with Mykola Siusko, 27-year-old politician and lawyer, who works with regional development in Transcarpathia. He

is active in his party (the Alliance Self-Help), but in the 2019 parliamentary election, his Christian Democrat Party imploded with the customary Ukrainian drama at the national level and plummeted from 11 per cent to under one per cent. Ukrainian politics was ever thus. You just have to take it on the chin. We meet at a restaurant by the Uzh where I have gobbled down a plate of the local delicacy Banush – a preparation of cornflower, bacon, pork fat, goat's cheese, and mushrooms.

"Our party's role is less about ideology than it is in the West. The main thing for us is to be an oppositional alternative and to galvanise development in the region", he tells me.

On a national level, Mykola Siusko considers the fight against corruption and for the rule of law to be the most crucial political issue. But he adds that democracy is just an empty shell and an instrument for populists if it is not also underpinned by regional grassroots activism.

"Democracy is more than just elections and large-scale opinion-forming. It is based on participation, and if Ukraine is to mature as a democracy, the young must feel that they can shape the future", he explains.

Siusko works for U-LEAD, a programme that schools young people in democratic processes. For three years he has arranged forums for young people to influence things happening close to them, such as language teaching or creating spaces for play and sports.

For Transcarpathia, this is also a means of tackling the problem of emigration. The population of the city of Uzhhorod itself hovers around a stable level, but the mountain and rural villages are haemorrhaging people to the cities or other countries.

"Over half of the population of Zakarpattya live in villages, the highest proportion in all of Ukraine. The

salaries in Prague and Budapest attract skilled young people from here. Besides, those who speak Hungarian are offered a Hungarian EU passport. This is why you don't hear so much Hungarian in town", he says.

The passport perquisite is one of many initiatives for mobilising ethnic Hungarians in the neighbouring countries, part of Viktor Orbán's nationalist politics. It is not unlike how Russia hands out Russian passports to Russophones in Donbass. Liberal democracy in Ukraine is under assault from both sides.

Regional cooperation initiatives have, according to Mykola Siusko, started to take off. In the setting up of joint councils for different villages, a mechanism has been created that has boosted the budget and, he claims, is making a difference.

"And then, of course, we have corruption to deal with. Building institutions is difficult."

As we end our chat, I ask him about his ethnic background.

"My parents call themselves Ruthenians. I call myself a Ukrainian. It's no big deal for us."

It may be a small question for Mykola, but probably a huge one for Ukraine, which has been home to multiple ethnicities, cultures, and languages. Liberals the world over, in Ukraine too, push for a system of national identity based mainly on citizenship within which diversity can flourish. In these turbulent times, voices are now heard against the use of Russian, and Transcarpathia reminds us that other smaller groups can also be affected. Maybe the Hungaro-Ukrainian group can be given a greater say in Ukrainian public life if the country changes tack.

Before I get my head down on the night train to Lviv, I take one last walk to the bridge over the Uzh, where the

river gurgles far below, piteously, as if the city's main artery has been drained and left the riverbed and the quays grotesquely over-dimensioned. A stage abandoned by the ensemble. History washes ethnic groups across the world's surface, leaving behind runnels and ever-widening bands of exposed rocky riverbed.

Hungarian is heard with decreasing frequency in Uzhhorod and the rural population is in decline.

The Ruthenian national identity is fading and all that remains of Lemkos, Boykos, or Hutsuls are folk songs, embroidered folkwear, dialectic idiosyncrasies, fragments of ancient traditions.

Andy Warhol, the Ruthenian from nowhere, embraced the global restlessness of modernity. His images of mass-produced celebrity created something unique – using an aesthetic derived from the mass communication of his time. Cans of Campbell's soup, released from their function as food advertisement; Marilyn, disengaged from her role as sex symbol; Mao, liberated from his significance as a politically charged symbol. Coloured, repeated, and exposed in large-scale format.

And Warhol, the real artwork, freed from his ethnic heritage, an urban "anywhere" without roots, an artist, a homosexual, mysteriously standoffish in dark glasses and a wig, a modern Gatsby, and superstar in the limelight of the capital of the modern world.

The Ruthenian experience, then. I come from nowhere.

Perhaps one can achieve dazzling individuality – or someone-ness we might say – for that very reason.

12 HOPE FOR A FREE FUTURE

"I hate Gorbachev because he stole my Motherland. I treasure my Soviet passport like it's my most precious possession. Yes, we stood in line for discolored chicken and rotten potatoes – but it was our motherland. I loved it."

–Anonymous quote from Svetlana Alexievich's *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets*

Has 21st century Ukraine stepped out of the Communist era shadow? When I began my research for this book, I imagined that this was the case – that today's Ukraine had for the most part replaced the tribulations of the 1900s with other challenges: populism, oligarchies, class divides, the war with Russia, and co-existence with globalisation and social media. And up to a point, I was right. A modern infrastructure has been rolled out in a country that in many respects looks like many others and has the same public issues to address as western Europe. And when the corona pandemic took hold in Ukraine, there was little of the denial and cover-up that we saw after the Chernobyl disaster. Yet

during two visits to Ukraine in 2019, I was struck even more by how heavily the Soviet legacy still hangs over people's lives. The tsar and the general secretary of the Communist Party may have been consigned to the history books, but people still yearn for a strong leader who steps in to put everything right. Vehicle-wise, the streets of the cities look no different from the global average, but in the rural areas and in the back yards, the rusty old Ladas still hold sway. And in conversations about the challenges facing the county, the Soviet epoch constantly crops up as an explanation and reference point for all manner of mischief.

However, at heart this legacy is often more Russian than Soviet – impregnated in Ukraine since the 18th century. Abiding within the Russian legacy is that of religious orthodoxy, which creates a common approach to the nature of existence. It is like a Russian doll: layer upon layer of historical experiences that, in terms of everyday Ukrainian life, continue to play a part – and pull apart.

Ukraine's 2020s identity-defining project revolves, then, around making peace with its Soviet and Russian background. Already back in 1992, essayist Mykola Ryabchuk launched his concept of "the two Ukraines", of an internal national tug-of-war. These days, he stresses that this struggle is primarily over values rather than culture or language. Czech author Milan Kundera sketched out an intellectual construct with a different perspective: in his *The Stolen West or The Tragedy of Central Europe*, he writes that the Iron Curtain of the Second World War shifted the old border between the Catholic Western Roman Empire and Orthodox Byzantium westwards and that the tribulations of 21st century Ukraine can be seen as an attempt to push it back. In this regard, Ukraine deserves the name of

Borderland: the country that pushes the border around. The old cliché of East versus West is also still very pertinent, as many people have taken it to heart – and sometimes let it serve as a convenient excuse.

If the 2000s offered an opportunity to weave the country's two main threads into a single identity, everything changed with Euromaidan. In 2021, the war between Ukraine and Russia, now in its eighth year, has claimed over 13,000 lives. In the eastern Donbass region, Russian-backed separatists have established a breakaway republic, while Crimea has been completely annexed by Russia.

After war broke out in 2014, it soon took on a modern, hybrid form, both open and clandestine, now with weapons on the frontlines, now as a digital war of propaganda fought through traditional and social media. In the information war, proaction, and strength have been paramount, and what is classified as truth has complied with the needs of power. This logic prompted Russia to send troops in unmarked uniforms to Crimea in February and March 2014 to support what it called a popular uprising against the Kyiv government. This was shortly followed by its formal annexation and the consequent imposition of sanctions on Russia by multiple countries. When a passenger flight operated by Malaysian Airlines was shot down by anonymous soldiers over Ukrainian territory in Donbass in July that the same year with the loss of 298 lives, the international crisis escalated and the sanctions were tightened.

In 2015, a Dutch study (most of the passengers came from the Netherlands) showed that the airplane had been downed by Russian-built artillery. Russia responded by coolly denying allegations of its involvement, and when the trial of the four men accused of shooting down the

airplane opened in the Netherlands in the spring of 2020, Russian sources complained of a media witch-hunt against the country.

The Russian perspective is rooted in a soon century-long revanchist narrative centred on the struggle against Fascism. The name the Second World War is given in Russia – "The Great Patriotic War" – hints at its significance to Russian identity, where self-esteem is conceptually bound up with a universally noble war. Russian expansion and its invasion of neighbouring states can therefore be described as a global movement for human liberation. More or less every pro-Russian opinion-forming text or interview with the Russian-on-the-street is replete with indignant stories of fascist provocateurs.

But Russia's status in the world is no longer what it once was, neither economically nor culturally. The nation, today an authoritarian nuclear power with a shrinking population, has an economy as large as South Korea's that is primarily based on oil and gas. What the Russian people feel about the country's imperial past is often a combination of pride and melancholy. The fact that nine out of Europe's ten tallest buildings are in Russia possibly says something about the country's need to flaunt its greatness. By cultivating an identity around historical victimhood, every perceived affront to national sentiments can motivate a demand for revenge. Even back when Ukraine – one of the Soviet Union's three core republics – proclaimed its independence in 1991, it was viewed in Russia as being just as sudden as it was incomprehensible. The idea of having Western-minded nations or, even worse, the arch-enemy NATO on the country's doorstep was an insult.

One key explanation for the war between Ukraine and Russia lies in the latter's own internal crisis of

economy and identity. And the war has been popular in Russia; it has boosted President Putin's support and bolstered his image as the nation's commander-in-chief.

Since Catherine the Great's colonisation of Crimea in the 18th century, the peninsula has grown into an emotional home for Russians, so when Khrushchev formally ceded it to Ukraine in 1954, it was more than anything a symbolic gesture within the Soviet family. But Ukraine's independence severed its ties to a Crimea where the majority population at the outbreak of war in 2014 was ethnic Russian. The fact that Russia leased Sevastopol for its Black Sea Fleet and that the Crimean Peninsula sits on large gas and oil reserves made an annexation in the south an attractive prospect for Russia. After having arranged a disputed referendum on independence, the area became part of Russia in 2014. In May 2018, a new almost twenty-kilometre bridge was officially opened over the Kerch Strait from the Russian mainland to Crimea by Vladimir Putin, at the wheel of a lorry.

Many Russians regard the annexation as a just correction of an abnormal state, while in Ukraine a general mood of resignation prevails that the Crimean Peninsula is lost territory.

Donbass in eastern Ukraine does not, however, obey the same logic. This region has a background as a sparsely populated rural district to where peasants relocated from the Cossack state around the Dnieper when it was incorporated into Russia in the 1700s. Donbass became a "borderland's borderland", a periphery of the periphery that has occasionally also striven for independence from Russia. Here, a sense of freedom has historically been cultivated that differs from the rest of Ukraine's. The region was also the

worst hit of the country's oblasts by Stalin's Great Purge. The struggle for independence in Donbass is thus regionalist in character (Johnsson, p. 20–22).

Russia's ambitions in Donbass have been to establish a de facto presence and to set up Russian institutions in the area, where Russian passports are now granted to Ukrainian citizens and where, in the spring of 2020, it was proclaimed that Ukrainian would no longer be an official language. However, certain signs have been discernible in the early 2020s that Russia's isolation and the war are reaching an end. In 2019, Zelensky signed an agreement based on the Steinmeier formula by which Donbass would be given autonomous status under Ukraine after demilitarisation and that local elections could be held there in the presence of international observers. That autumn, the countries exchanged several hundred prisoners, and three warships were returned to Ukraine in November. Ukrainian film director Oleg Sentsov and environmental activist Aleksander Kolchenko, both convicted of terrorism, were repatriated.

In December, Ukraine and Russia agreed on a continued gas supply to Europe via Ukraine.

Still in 2021, troop manoeuvres and attacks flare up in Donbass, and people continue to die. The propaganda war is also grinding on, on both sides. If the Kremlin feels threatened, it can spill over onto Ukraine. So, when opposition leader Alexei Navalny began his hunger strike in April 2021 and anti-Putin demonstrations gathered growing numbers of people on the streets, it was not long before Russia's defence minister Sergey Shoygu ordered large-scale military exercises on Ukraine's eastern border.

Meanwhile, Ukraine continues to work through

its national identity crisis. "Little Russia" was once the name of parts of Ukraine, sometimes along with Belarus. A little more slovenly, a little more freedom-loving, populated by a kind of Russian in shorts and Mazepa on their tee-shirts. The Cossack heritage may be a myth, but such myths constitute narratives from which a people can draw a genuine sense of commonality.

Volodymyr Yermolenko, Ukrainian intellectual and editor of Euromaidan Press, has written about the presence of a culture of suffering in the East, in contrast to the West, where a hedonistic view of modernisation early took root. In the online magazine Eurozine (25 July 2019), Yermolenko writes that the collapse of the Soviet system led to the emergence of an attitude that merged this culture of suffering with a newly discovered hedonism. People realised formerly suppressed consumer dreams of money, power, luxury, and sex but retained the deep-rooted Soviet belief that the only way to obtain the good things in life is to purloin them from others. In Ukraine, Yermolenko argues, an instinct to purchase security also arose, history having taught people that what they own today can be gone tomorrow.

Ukraine's battle for identity, be it a duel or a decathlon, is gravitating towards a liberal, pluralist, and what one might consider a western European mindset.

Russia won several territorial battles but has lost the war for Ukraine's loyalty and affinity. Putin's war, paradoxically, thus achieved what no Ukrainian president since independence has managed to do: unite the country around a burgeoning national sentiment.

So, is the glass half full or half empty? In early 2020, the future seemed to brighten. Ukraine's economy seemed fit and healthy, its budget deficit and national debt had shrunk, and inflation had dropped from around

18 per cent in the summer of 2019 to around five per cent. Foreign investment had increased, along with IT exports. In 2020, the much sought-after land reforms resulted in a bill for trading in agricultural lands in Ukraine, which the parliament passed during the spring.

But the corona pandemic had struck, and by the following January, hopes had been dashed. The economy took a beating, albeit not as severely as had first been feared, and GDP dropped by five per cent in 2020, unsurprisingly given the global situation. Its currency reserves increased thanks to inflated prices on grain and iron ore while the cost of imported energy fell. When international tourism imploded, Ukraine was less severely hit, partly because it is not a major tourist destination and partly because the population spent their money at home.

Most ominously of all, the clear progress that had been made in the fight against corruption stalled. The anti-corruption court was neutered and leading reformists in Zelensky's government were sidelined. And the president's popularity nosedived. In the regional elections of October 2020, Servant of the People suffered nationwide losses.

In Transparency International's corruption index for 2019, the country ranked 126 out of 180. *The Economist*'s "Intelligence Unit" annual classification still categorises Ukraine as a hybrid regime between an autocracy and a democracy – a step above Russia but below neighbouring Poland, classified as a "flawed democracy". In the spring of 2020, Washington-based Global Financial Integrity published a study stating that a full 20 per cent of Ukrainian trade is illicit and riddled with misinvoicing, money laundering, and tax evasion.

Again, Ukraine's fate. Just when the country seems

to be reaching redress and prosperity, hopes are crushed by overpowering forces and an inability to break through deeply ingrained corruption.

On the other hand, this pattern is so familiar in Ukraine that the people habitually rise up out of the ruins and trudge on.

It is what it is.

Even before the corona crisis, there were many who were sceptical towards all talk of the country's blooming prospects. Kyrylo Tretiak, democracy trainer at the EECMD who sketched out the challenges facing Ukrainian democracy in chapter one, has moved on to academic historical research and is dubious about the regime and the progress the country has made:

"Generally speaking, I don't think that the Zelensky regime has shown any significant positive results in any area. The professionalism of the government is low and the parliament is rife with conflict and scandal."

Tretiak's desire for a party system based on policy platforms instead of person-centred projects has shown small but elusive signs of change. At the Servant of the People congress in February 2020, party strategist Oleksandr Korniyenko declared that Ukraine needs a programme different to that offered by nationalism, communism, and neoliberalism and held out the prospect of a "Ukrainian centrism" free from extremism and radicalism:

"We are patriots and even nationalists when it comes to defending our country. But we are humanists when it comes to the defence of human rights and personal freedoms. [...] We are liberals when we defend reasonable economic freedoms. Yet we are socialists when it comes to protecting the poor and our pensioners", said Korniyenko, serving up an ideological dish that seemed

cooked to suit all palates.

Despite the misery of war and pandemic, a weak economy, and persistent corruption, a palpable normalisation of life has gradually settled on the country. Here, a vital role is played by digitalisation: mobile phones, internet, Uber, Airbnb, Facebook, Instagram, and, perhaps even more consequentially, the digitalisation of public and commercial services.

The lives of young Ukrainians resemble those of many places on Earth, and herein lies one of the great, often forgotten narratives of modern times, that of the global spread of the middle class. This vast expansion no longer covers hundreds of millions but billions of people, who have children in school, have access to primary care, socialise on the move with global and local friends, stream films, and wear comfortable sports fashions with trainers, tee-shirts, and factory-distressed jeans in a style that differs little from Stockholm to Luhansk.

As in many other countries, Ukraine's democracy operates in a market economy where politics is conducted on media terms and in a way that gives populists an ominous advantage. But these terms differ from those in the West in one significant way: Ukraine is marked by the challenges of emigration, western Europe by those of immigration. A fundamental difference in attitude towards globalisation is taking shape.

Unlike its economically stronger neighbours like Poland, Hungary, and Russia, Ukraine has a libertarian kind of nationalism in which diversity has become entrenched in spite – and partly because – of the country's straggling oligarchic rule.

Ukraine's nationalists are globally minded. Ukraine bears a promise of openness.

One autumn evening my airplane takes off northward

from the city's Boryspol airport and I recall a comment from Andriy Kruglashov, the activist and consultant I met at the restaurant in Kyiv:

"Ukraine is the graveyard of empires. Karl XII's Sweden, Tsarist Russia post-1917, Austria-Hungary after the First World War, Germany after the second, and the Soviet Union after the referendum in 1991. But in today's Ukraine, all former presidents except Yanukovych still live in the country. That's a good sign, if you ask me."

BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

Abrahamsson, Kjell Albin (2011). *Ukraina, Ukrain*a Stockholm: Silc förlag.

Aleksijevitj, Svetlana (2013). *Tiden Second Hand: Slutet för den röda människan*. Stockholm: Ersatz.

Aleksijevitj, Svetlana (2013). *Bön för Tjernobyl: Krönika över framtiden*. Stockholm: Ersatz.

Applebaum, Anne (2018). *Red Famine: Stalin's War on Ukraine*. London: Penguin Books.

Englund, Peter (1988). *Poltava: Berättelsen om en armés undergång*. Stockholm: Atlantis.

Hessérus, Marianne (2016). *The Elephant's Foot* Stockholm: Natur & Kultur.

Fukuyama, Francis, (1992). *Historiens slut och den sista människan*. Stockholm: Norstedts.

Johnsson, Peter (2015). *Ukraina i historien*. Stockholm: Carlsson Bokförlag.

Kleveman, Lutz C. (2017). *Lemberg: Die vergessenes Mitte Europas*. Berlin: Aufbau Verlag.

Klid, Bohdan (2013). *"Holodomor: Holodomor and UN Genocide Convention Criteria"*. *Modern Genocide: Understanding Causes and Consequences*, ABC- CLIO, 2013. Web. 21 Nov. 2013.

Kundera, Milan (2019). *Ett kidnappat Västerland – eller Centraleuropas tragedi*. Stockholm: Timbro.

Kniivilä, Kalle (2015). *Krim tillhör oss: Imperiets återkomst*. Stockholm: Atlas.

Kuromiya, Hiroaki (1998) *"Freedom and Terror in the Donbas: A Ukrainian–Russian Borderland, 1870s–1990s"*, Cambridge Russian, Soviet, and Post-Soviet Studies, volume 104. Ed. Stephen White et al. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Laurén, Anna-Lena and Lodenius, Peter (2015). *Ukraina – gränslandet*. Stockholm: Atlantis.

Laurén, Anna-Lena (2013). *Frihetens pris är okänt*. Stockholm: Atlantis.

Liljegren, Bengt (2000). *Karl XII: En biografi*. Lund: Historiska Medier.

Mearsheimer, John (2014). *"Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault"*, Foreign Affairs, Sept.–Oct. 2014, vol. 95, no. 5.

Mercouris, Alexander (2015). *Kan Ukraina-krisen lösas på fredlig väg?* Stockholm: Karneval Förlag.

Olsson, Stefan (2016). *Vilseledning: Kriget i Ukraina i svenska medier*. Stockholm: Timbro förlag.

Persson, Gudrun (2006). *Varför föll Sovjetunionen?* Stockholm: SNS Förlag.

Plokhy, Sergii (2017). *The Gates of Europe: A history of Ukraine*. New York: Basic Books.

Plokhy, Sergii (2017). *Chernobyl: The History of a Nuclear Catastrophe*. New York: Basic Books.

Reid, Anna (2015). *Borderland: A Journey through the History of Ukraine*. London: Basic Books.

Shore, Marci (2017). *The Ukrainian Night: An Intimate History of Revolution*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.

Söderbaum, Hanna (2018). *"From Oligarch to Benefactor? Legitimation Strategies among the Wealthy Elite in Post-Soviet Ukraine"*, Uppsala Studies in Economic History vol. 113, p. 90. Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis.

ARTICLES AND WEBSITES

Gorbachov, Michail (21 April 2006), "Turning point at Chernobyl". *Japan Times*: https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2006/04/21/commentary/world-commenta- ry-turning-point-at-chernobyl.

Lauren, Anna-Lena (2019), "Så försöker Kreml hemlighålla sommarens stora kärnolycka", Stockholm, *Dagens Nyheter*: https://www.dn.se/nyheter/varlden/sa-forsoker-kreml-hemlighalla-sommarens-stora-karnolycka/.

Peterson, Nolan (2017), "Why is Ukraine's population shrinking?". *Newsweek*, 26 February 2017.

Radio Free Europe. "Holodomor": https://www.rferl.org/a/1103170.html.

Ukraine Research and Education Consortium (web sites), *Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies* (CIUS), University of Alberta, Alberta: https://holodomor.ca/maniak-collection/

All other information has been sourced from online editions of *Kyiv Post*, the Ukrainian Information Agency and Ukraine World, plus BBC World, CNN and *The Guardian*.

The statue above the Dnipro: Volodymyr the Great abolished Perun, the god of thunder, and mass-baptised the people of Kievan Rus'

The cars (below): Every true Ukrainian inner yard needs to be supplied with at least one car wreck. With time, newer and less discreet cars have been added to the fleet. After the end of Communism, a culture of suffering mixed with uninhibited hedonism emerged in the East, according to author Milan Kundera.

Top left: In front of one of Pripyat's parade buildings, birches have burst through the steps and in the nuclear-town's houses, wild boars and roe deer pass through the rooms and corridors at dawn.

Above: Fridge magnet with Chernobyl motif.

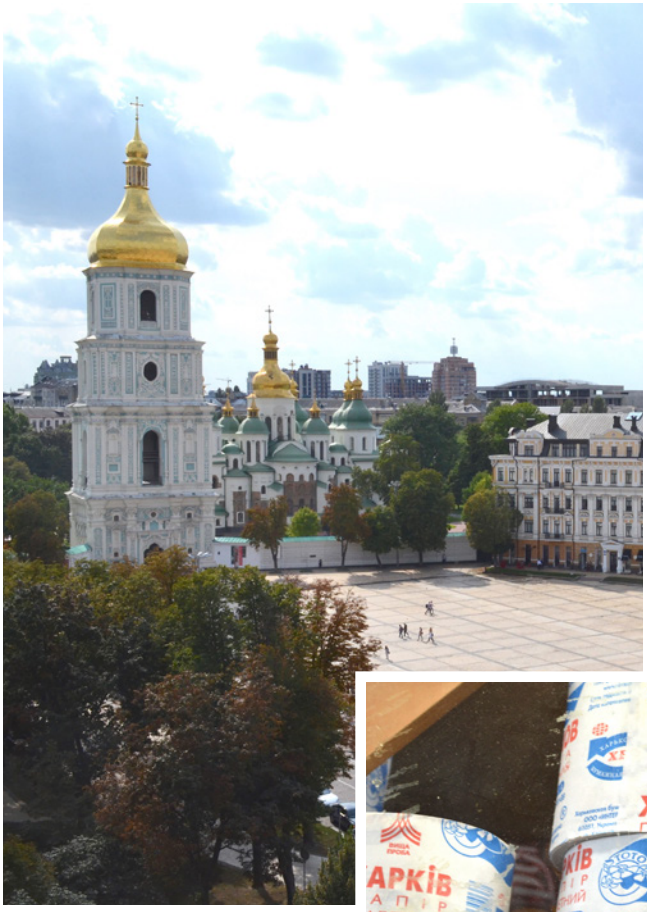
Top right: The guide indicates a Pripyat radiation hotspot.

Bottom right: The Kopachi orphanage, evacuated in April 1986.

Top left: Environment activist Anna Ambrosova and her husband Dima in front of one of the iron mines in the heavily polluted city of Kryvyi Rih in south eastern Ukraine.

Top right: A Cossack and a “Swedish” Carolean lay a bouquet of flowers at the monument to commemorate the 310th anniversary of the battle of Poltava.

Left and above: Most impressive of all the country’s monuments of Taras Shevchenko is the epic presentation of Ukrainian history and its national hero found in Charkiv. It was erected in 1935, two years after the great famine.

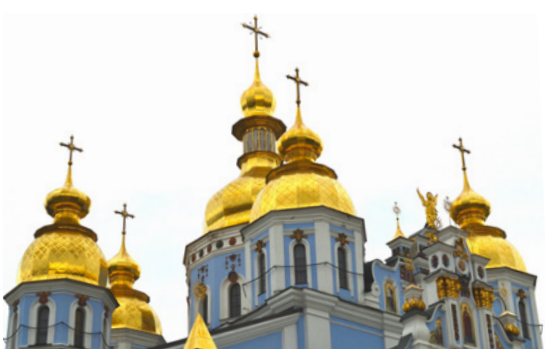


Above: The Baroque-style Saint Sofia Cathedral has parts dating back to the time when Viking clans ruled the city. Mounted on the horse statue in front of it is the disputed Cossack leader Khmelnytsky.

Right: Is there anything more glamorous than a toilet roll from Charkiv? Possibly, but the classic Soviet-scented design still has its robust charm.

Right: Taras Shevchenko's national university, Kyiv. Red and black were the colours of the St Volodymyr Order, which once lent its name to the university. The Russian order was formed under Catherine the Great in 1883.

Below: The museum and memorial site of Pechersk commemorate the Soviet soldiers and mourning folk of the Second World War.



St Michael's Golden-Domed Monastery became a safe haven during the 2014 Euromaidan revolution.

The high-rise blocks in Kyiv often seem to be twice the size and stand twice as close as one is used to.

Maidan Nezalezhnosti, Independence Square, with its crock of gold at the end of the rainbow. Up the hill lies the government buildings. In the background to the right rises the Hotel Ukraine, from where roof-top snipers gunned down protestors in 2014.






Top row from the left: Mykola Ryabchuk (ch. 7 & 9), Olga Nemanezhyna (ch. 3), Kyrylo Tretiak (ch. 1 & 12), Tamara Zlobina (ch. 3 & 9)
Bottom row from the left: Andriy Kruglashov (ch. 7 & 12), Bogdan Andryuschenko (ch. 12)

PHOTOS: P. Frigyes


elf
SIL

IN UKRAINE, ADRIFT

Messy, care-free and lacking a sense of responsibility – Ukraine is a country with a grand and bloody history and regular fistfights in the parliament. With its size, geographical location and ongoing breakup from its towering neighbour Russia, Ukraine has entered the 20s navigating through populism, unbridled capitalism and sprouting democratic activism. In a Europe beset by forces of authoritarianism and nationalism, Ukraine has - in an unorderly manner - taken small but clear steps towards a modern liberal democracy. Its nationalism is one of a curiously internationalist brand.

***In Ukraine, adrift* is a report from a nation in search of an identity and a place in Europe. Paul Frigyes jumps on the train to Lviv to discuss gender roles, tries to get his head around corruption and the post-Soviet economy in grand Kyiv, digs into memories of genocide and forgotten bodies in Kharkiv in the East, meets environmental activists in the rough steel city of Kryvyi Rih and gets lost in the footsteps of Karl XII and Mazepa in the woods of Poltava. Finally, he visits Chernobyl as it turns into a Mecca for misery tourism.**

Democracy activist Andriy Kruglashov summarizes the state of Ukraine, a nation that in 2021 turns 30 years old: “We are somewhere between pure madness and something that could turn out really good.”