

# EUROPE'S *UKRAINA*: AN INTRODUCTION

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE to tell how the struggle over Ukraine's future will end. We cannot know whether the country will stand up to Russian aggression or fall to its knees; whether the Europeans, the West, will defend or abandon it; whether the European Union will close ranks or disintegrate. What is certain is that Ukraine will never again fade from our mental maps. Not so long ago, this state, this people, this nation barely existed in the general consciousness. In Germany in particular, it was widely thought of as somehow part of 'Russia', of the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union, and that its inhabitants spoke a language that was a kind of subspecies of Russian. With the 'Revolution of Dignity' Ukrainians ignited on Maidan, and in their resistance to Russia's attempts to destabilize their state, they have demonstrated that an evolving reality has long made this view obsolete. The time is ripe to take a fresh look at the map and review what we think we know.

That is certainly how I felt. Writing a book on Ukraine was not part of what I had planned for this stage in my life. But there are situations in which developments make a mockery of our plans and compel us to join the fray. Putin's surprise conquest of Crimea and the ongoing war in eastern Ukraine left me no other choice. Not because I believe I am especially competent; in fact, on the contrary: I realized that I had spent a lifetime studying eastern Europe, Russia, the Soviet Union without ever knowing much about Ukraine – and I was not the only one in my field who came to this realization. The general public was even more clueless. The non-stop media talk was almost entirely about Putin's Russia, which was described not as a political subject and active player but as a victim that responded to the initiatives of the West. People rarely spoke to Ukrainians, preferring to talk about them and their country.

Many participants in the debate were recognizably ignorant of the nation they were opining on and saw no need to go there to learn more about it. In Germany, which had occupied and ravaged Ukraine not once but twice in the twentieth century, many of the same speakers who were eloquently empathetic with the ‘Russian soul’ had nothing to say about the Ukrainians beyond the stereotype of inveterate nationalists and anti-Semites. I felt largely impotent in the face of this ignorance and arrogance of armchair generals who, to make matters worse, smugly regarded themselves as occupying the progressive position. Week after week, German television audiences can choose between dozens of films about Russia, mostly river-journey travelogues and historical documentaries. By contrast, a full year after Ukraine was turned into a theatre of war, at least the public broadcasters have not managed to give the country a face beyond the images from Maidan: no documentary about Odessa or the Donbass or the history of the Cossacks, no tour of Lviv or Chernivtsi – places that might in fact mean something to some Germans thanks to the poets old and recent among their sons and daughters. In short, Ukraine remained a blank on our horizon, a vacant spot that was at most a source of vague unease.

This book is an attempt, my attempt, to form a picture of Ukraine. It is not a history of Ukraine, for which the reader is directed to the works of several eminent historians (the Further Reading section lists the studies I found the most helpful). Nor does it try to narrate and comment on current events in the country; that is the task of journalists and reporters, some of whom do their jobs with positively heroic dedication. I get to know a country by exploring its historical topographies. My way of familiarizing myself with a nation’s or a culture’s history and distinctive character is to travel to its places and survey its spaces. I have described this method in my book *In Space We Read Time: On the History of Civilization and Geopolitics* (2016, originally published in German in 2003). One can ‘read cities’, decrypt them as textures and palimpsests, uncover their strata in a kind of urban archaeology, in order to make their past speak. Cities are documents of the first order, and they can be parsed and decoded. In the perspective I propose – as an alternative to the macrocosmic-global and microcosmic views – cities then reveal themselves to be the points in which the spaces of history and historical experience attain their maximum density.

Portraits of Ukrainian cities, the fruits of this form of urban archaeology, form the core of the present volume. Their mesoscopic

perspective offers advantages that cannot be overstated, especially for the study of the history of Ukraine, a nation defined not in ethnic but in political terms whose territory bears the imprints of the history and culture of very different empires. The fragmentary, the particular, the regional are the crucial registers in which the specific nature of Ukraine's emergence as a nation and nation state finds expression. The collection of city portraits in the following pages is far from complete: I should very much have liked to include Vinnytsia and Chernihiv and the Ukrainian village, so horribly devastated by the Holodomor; a visit to Uman or Drohobych, where I could have gleaned the remaining traces of the shtetl, the centre of Eastern European Jewish life annihilated in the Shoah, would arguably have been essential; and I should have gone for a stroll on the DNEPROGES dam, that icon of Soviet modernization. Despite these and other regrettable gaps, I believe that the studies presented in this book can open readers' eyes to the extraordinary complexity and richness of today's Ukraine. We have only just begun to explore this European borderland and 'miniature Europe'.

The portraits of Lviv and Chernivtsi date from the late 1980s, while those of Odessa and Yalta were sketched in 2000. They are now outdated, the cities they paint thoroughly altered by recent events. Still, they capture a perspective and a shift of perspective that are themselves quite illuminating: Lviv and Chernivtsi appeared on our radar when Central Europe, the Europe that was neither East nor West, resurfaced; so Ukraine was not altogether beyond the European horizon even then. 'The centre lies to the east,' I had argued in the 1980s, before the fall of the Wall. Now we realize that this eastward expansion of our field of view was incomplete, that we need to enter cities like Kharkov, Dnepropetrovsk, Donetsk on our maps. The accounts of Crimea and Odessa, meanwhile, bring home another important insight: the imperial history that informs the post-Soviet space – though both were part of Ukraine during the Soviet period – will remain palpable for a long time, with effects that no decree can undo from one day to the next.

Ukraine has decided to pursue its own path and defend the way of life it has chosen, to resist the Russian aggression. The blue-and-yellow flag of Ukraine flew over the Maidan uprising, but so did the blue European flag with its golden stars.

KARL SCHLÖGEL, Vienna, June 2015



Russian journalists on their last day at work for the independent news website Lenta.ru, based in Moscow.

## ONE

# INFORMATION WAR

**I**N NORMAL TIMES, a writer can choose the circumstances of his work. He sets the rhythm in which he turns to his various tasks, works through a stack of books he has accumulated, constructs chapter after chapter. Everything has its time; the entire process is structured and manageable. But then there are moments, situations, that wreak havoc on a writer's plans; he is thrown off balance and must remake his arrangements and find a new footing if he hopes to keep up with his times. The pacing of his projects is then determined by outside events. He is compelled to react, devise some sort of response, not because he wants to get in on the game, make himself heard, 'raise his voice', but because he has been struck, because everything – the concerns of a lifetime's worth of study – is suddenly at stake, because he feels that, in some sense, he himself has been dealt a blow. He has no choice but to fight back – 'strike back' would perhaps be too strong. I found myself in such a situation when protesters were massacred on Kiev's Maidan Nezalezhnosti or Independence Square, generally known in the West simply as 'Maidan', and when Vladimir Putin spouted the bald-faced lie that there was no annexation of Crimea even as we watched it happen with our own eyes.

'Situation Room': an English phrase that entered general parlance at some point during the last year, presumably thanks to the popular format pioneered by CNN: 'You're in the Situation Room, where news and information are arriving all the time. Standing by: CNN reporters across the United States and around the world to bring you the day's top stories. Happening now . . . I'm Wolf Blitzer, and you're in the Situation Room.' The set-up is supposedly modelled on the White House Situation Room created under President Kennedy: a central

control post where incoming information is collated and condensed in real time to provide a view of the world at a single glance.

When the world is so much with you that you can no longer go about the work you had set yourself to do, much, though perhaps not everything, is different. You stop trying to keep the news at bay; on the contrary, you depend on it, you hunger for it. If, like me, you have not given up resistance to the Internet and the pressure to be available at all times, you must rush to familiarize yourself with the web's technologies and techniques if you want to stay current. Not out of a penchant for visual thrills or as an idle pastime but because everything rides on the next piece of news, the next event: will the chain of violence be broken, will the machine come to a halt, or will the escalation continue? Disasters are not just conceivable but real at every moment. You are sucked into the maelstrom of information, which is now available in unlimited quantities, innumerable snippets of news that are infinitely diverse, contradictory, each giving the lie to the other. Casting about for something to hold on to, you turn to the summaries, analyses, editorials, opinion pieces that follow each other in rapid succession. But they do not let you catch your breath either, as developing events make their conclusions moot before the printer's ink has dried. You are a thousand miles away and yet right there, for thousands of eyes watch from thousands of vantage points throughout the space in which history unfolds. You are on a windowsill in a corner building overlooking an intersection in Donetsk's Leninsky District, observing everyday life in the occupied city: armoured vehicles are moving over there, but workers are also busy building bicycle lanes, while shelling can be heard in the distance. You see the pictures from the basements that have become bomb shelters and the press conferences of the warlords who have made themselves at home in the offices of the oligarchs. The interim director of the Donetsk Opera gives interviews about the season's repertoire. The sociologist who is forced to leave his university submits a final report on the new lines of social conflict in the city: a scholarly autopsy from the war zone.

All of this floods the study, coming in through a wide variety of channels: broadcasts on television, on Russian, Ukrainian and many other stations, and reports in newspapers that are available online – the *Donetsk Times*, the *Kharkiv Times*, the *Kyiv Post*, Moscow's *Novaya Gazeta*. You can watch as commentators make sense of the events on the discussion programmes: Savik Schuster's, in Russian and

Ukrainian, from Kiev; the one on Dozhd, the Moscow cable channel that is surprisingly still on air; interviews on *Ekho Moskvy*; and the unending and virtually unchanging ritual of the talk shows on the German stations. In Germany, people somehow still do not seem to grasp what is happening in Ukraine. Then there are pictures, letters, op-ed articles, démentis – everything accumulates in the study where a writer is usually at work on books that examine the history of the space in which these news stories originate. And you know that you will never be able to keep up, and know, too, that for the time being and perhaps for a long time, you will be powerless against the gravitational pull of habit, of ignorance, of proliferating and self-perpetuating prejudices. It is a feeling of boundless impuissance. In this situation room, where the news and images from Ukraine, primarily from the contested areas, converge, it is difficult to stay cool and hold your nerve.

Destabilization is not an abstract idea: a destabilization campaign of the sort conducted by Russia is directed against the ‘authority’, the ‘sovereignty’ of a state. But the true target of destabilization is the integrity of the adversary under attack, the country’s society or, more precisely speaking, its people. The ultimate goal of a destabilization campaign against a state, a society, is to break people. To bring a country to its knees, one must bring its citizens to theirs. To force a government to surrender, one must force those who elected that government to submit, to accept submission. Escalation dominance is not something that is asserted against an abstract entity – a nation, an army, a government – but a form of *ad hominem* violence. Rules are dictated to someone, someone’s will is imposed on someone, someone is given an ultimatum and must respond one way or another. Of course, those on whom this conflict has been forced can opt out, choosing resignation, indifference, cynicism, defeatism. All these attitudes are material factors in the ongoing struggle over Ukraine; in the past, they have sometimes been crucial, contributing to the escalation of wars, even triggering their outbreak. One thing they have never done is prevent a war.

It is never quiet in the situation room. Breaking news is announced around the clock. Time itself has a different cast. What is happening calls for commentary, even for an intervention, but those are hardly the historian’s strengths. His *métier* is the *longue durée*, the completed series of events. He is competent when it comes to the past, to history, but his grasp of current affairs can be shaky. Current affairs are the

business of the man of action who commands the tanks to advance or retreat and produces the next breaking news. He does not pause to offer explanations; those will come when all is done. The only antagonist who is a match for him is one who stands up to him – yet beyond the Ukrainians, who have no choice but to fight, such men are nowhere to be seen.

One effect of the new media is that we are always up to speed, that we have access to live images and can watch almost in real time as frontlines shift, villages and towns are captured, bridges and railway tracks are blown up. Thanks to Google Maps and satellite-based information systems, we can make out Donetsk's main thoroughfare, the football stadium, the culture park, the airport that has been reduced to rubble. We zoom in on a steppe crossed by European route E40 and the fields into which the Malaysian passenger plane crashed. The table in my study that is usually reserved for the maps on which I locate the scenes of historic events are now covered with charts that let me navigate the theatre of the current war: Gorlovka, Enakievo, Torez, Debaltsevo, Artyomovsk and on and on. We can follow the ongoing military operations and mark the new frontlines on our maps. We read the messages and letters from the war zone on the blogs, read about what is going on in the basements and the prisons. We become mere witnesses, onlookers, observing with our own eyes and ears a battle whose outcome others determine and others pay for with their lives.

To be in the situation room is to be lonely. Every one of us must make his own sense of the flood of images and news. The world of shared certainties falls apart, and our power of judgement is challenged, a test we had hoped we would never again be subjected to. The shells that explode in the cities and towns also shatter the portraits of their urban fabrics. The present does not allow us to study the past as it ought to be studied: from a distance. In a time of war, how could one paint the sweeping view of the Dnieper from the hill on which Kiev's Monastery of the Caves stands without opening himself to the charge of sentimentality? Portraits of cities are not wanted when the bombs fall. It is the war reporter's time and even more the war photographer's. Details that would otherwise be indispensable now sound like chatter, as if the speaker had more time than he knew what to do with, as if he were trying to cover up his embarrassment, as if he were oblivious of the world around him. It is an unfamiliar experience, being an eyewitness when the gloves come off. Describing battles is a craft we have

never learned. Observers who offer their accounts from a distance, we are no longer needed. Our opinions have long divided us into stable camps that respected each other's cherished commonplaces, but that stability is disintegrating, and each one of us must stake out his position in light of a new set of circumstances. This realignment requires us to make decisions. It is an individual, a molecular process: it is not an anonymous 'society' that positions itself anew, that confronts an unwonted situation; everyone must make his own choice. The build-up of defensive capabilities against a war fomented by others comes after a protracted and agonizing period of destabilization, fragmentation, atomization. Destabilization is how the transition to a different Europe takes place. Will we endure, will we weather this storm? These anguished questions may already be obsolete by the time the book appears in print. Notes from yesterday.