



UNDERSTANDING THE WAR IN UKRAINE



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CMC and RBC are collaborating to bring this thoughtful piece on the war between Russia and Ukraine from Harley Wagler who has lived and worked in Eastern Europe and Russia for more than 40 years.

Part 1: The Scenario on the Ground

"The words from the sacred Scripture come to my mind: There is no greater love than if someone gives his soul for his friends."

These words from Russian president Vladimir Putin echoed across the vast space to the 200,000 people who jammed Moscow's Luzhniki Stadium on March 18 to celebrate the eighth anniversary of Russia's annexation of Crimea. More importantly, he was referencing the soldiers who are fighting shoulder to shoulder in what is called a "special military operation" in Ukraine.

Putin lauded the soldiers' heroism – "We haven't seen such unity in a long time." According to him, these heroes are upholding Christian values.

Several days earlier, Yuri Sipko, the former head of Russia's largest Baptist group, had cited the same verse, John 15:13, when referencing the military operation. Sipko called on Christians to pray for a resolution to the conflict, and added that this scripture should be the wartime guiding principle for the Ukrainian people. For Russian Baptists reading his statement, the ambiguity is striking.

These pronouncements highlight the fact that in the cauldron of war, allegiances are tested when emotions run high and people are suffering.

Two centuries ago, the Russian poet Mikhail Lermontov, in a poem entitled "Motherland," revealed this ambiguity when talking about patriotism. "I love my Motherland, but with an odd love." He reflects on the glory that his country has bought with blood, but it doesn't bring him comforting delight.

When national pride, ethnicity, religious faith, and politics are thrown together, one can quickly lose sight of the absolute, eternal values that have shaped us as Christians.

I have learned to love Russia, having lived there for the last twenty-seven years, which has understandably shaped my perspectives. I haven't lived in Ukraine, but have visited on

several occasions, and have many Ukrainian acquaintances, especially in the church. I love the Russian people and culture, the great historical faith they embrace, but my affection at this moment, like Lermontov's, is an "odd love." This war is horribly evil.

Given the ongoing war in Ukraine, even devout Christians cannot avoid talking about the brutal military and political realities. We must place our Christian pilgrimage into the context of current events.

Ukraine's 2014 "Maidan Revolution" is crucial background to this conflict; the sitting president was ousted and replaced on an interim basis by Oleksandr Turchinov, a leading elder in one of Kyiv's largest Baptist churches. He had worked for years in the Security Services. In one of his first acts as president he sent armed personnel to the Donbass region to put down protests by people who opposed the new regime. He gained the nickname "the bloody Baptist," and frequently appeared in photos wearing a camouflage uniform and carrying a weapon.

Russian Baptists expressed consternation that "one of their own" was prominently displayed in this way, since they weren't accustomed to being actively involved in politics. Vestiges of pacifism remained in the denomination since its formation in the late nineteenth century.

During the Soviet period, many Protestants refused to bear arms and suffered greatly. In the back of the Baptist church I attended in Russia, a long bulletin board showed photos of not-forgotten people who died at the hands of the oppressive Soviet government—hence the timidity of Russian Baptists with regard to political involvement.

This approach stands in contrast to their Ukrainian fellow believers who in the last few decades have been inundated with Western missionaries, many of whom haven't left their flags and political handbooks behind. Consequently, this war has exacerbated tensions that have been simmering between the two Protestant groups since Maidan.

In the last eight years, the local Baptist church where I lived has regularly delivered food and aid packages to their fellow believers in the Donbass region. Numerous families have relatives there. One must also note that the greatest population of Protestants in the Soviet Union lived in the Ukrainian republic, and one of the leading Baptist Bible institutes for many years operated in Donetsk. Presently, my Russian goddaughter, educated as a lawyer, is working with Ukrainian refugees from the Donbass area. Tens of thousands of people in the area are fleeing to Russia to escape the violence in their homeland.

The Orthodox Church is by far the majority religion in both Russia and Ukraine, which over the centuries has acquired civilization-building status. In 988, the foundation of Eastern Christianity among the Slavs was laid in Kyiv. Recently, Orthodoxy's "symphonic" relationship with the state has been shaken as maps in Europe have been redrawn. This factor is significant in Putin's understanding of Russia's place in the world; the war he is waging in Ukraine testifies to his repeated statements that Russians and Ukrainians are one people.

Especially since Maidan in 2014, tensions between these two countries have been evident among the Orthodox populations. In 2019, the Istanbul-based ecumenical patriarch officially recognized the legitimacy of a Ukrainian breakaway faction, the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), not to be confused with the previously-existing Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), which remains part of the Russian Orthodox Church. The OCU has pleaded with Russia's Patriarch Kirill to denounce the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

"I am praying through the rage of an almost tangible pain... Our lives have been smashed, our souls have been burnt." ~An Odesa church leader

Patriarch Kirill's pronouncements that the Russian Orthodox Church is offering "a special fervent prayer for the speedy restoration of peace" have not satisfied the Ukrainians.

Not to be outdone, Igor Bandura, vice president of Ukraine's Baptist Union, the largest body of Protestants in the country, addressed Russia: "Who are you to say our nation doesn't exist? The truth is with us, and God is with us. We want to live in peace, but if Russia wants to take this from us, let's fight."

The civilizational quest is not the prerogative of the Orthodox alone. Rick Perhai, at the Kyiv Theological Seminary, is blunter: "Pray that the nation of Russia would tire of their tyrant's rantings at home and abroad, and that they would remove him."

Recently, I spoke with a person with considerable business connections in Ukraine. Several days ago, he communicated with a Christian colleague from Kyiv who cheerfully accepted one of the guns the government is freely distributing. He will remain to defend his country while his wife and daughter are temporarily located abroad.

Vitalii Vlasenko, Russian Evangelical Alliance general secretary, advocates peace-making incentives. Evangelical Christians are praying every day for the Almighty "to give us all wisdom, to

preserve the fragile peace and not to plunge our countries into fratricidal conflict."

Part 2: A Christian Response

As naked aggression, indiscriminate bombing, and unimaginable human suffering enter this toxic mixture of indefinable nationalism, different faith traditions, strong personalities, and the protection of institutions and foreign economic interests—what is the Christian response?

We must listen to our fellow believers on the ground—those who are closest to the events.

Prayer: The overwhelming response of evangelicals on both sides of the barricades has been to pray. An iconic picture from a square in Kharkiv shows a small group of believers kneeling on the cobblestones. Many congregations have established specific prayer times and circulated petitions to give direction for intercessory prayers.

Anabaptists, with their emphasis on practical discipleship, may not be the best advocates of prayer and meditation, important aspects of Orthodox spirituality. But as Maxym Oliferovski, a leader with the Mennonite Brethren mission, sees death all around him in the Zaporizhzhia area, he prays for a miracle that will stop the bloodshed and bring peace to troubled souls. He prays that his family will faithfully endure hardships so they can continue serving needy local people as well as refugees.

Taras Dyatlik, who works in theological education, says people should pray for the "truth" to be revealed to both sides in the conflict. (The Russian language has two words for "truth"—practical truth and spiritual truth). He refers to both kinds.

Special prayers during this crisis: Ukrainian citizens are experiencing unspeakable physical suffering. Not only military targets, but also residential areas and safe havens are being bombed. They are suffering physically, mentally, and socially in ways we can hardly imagine.

As a church leader in Odesa said: "I am praying through the rage of an almost tangible pain... Our lives have been smashed, our souls have been burnt, and there is no end in sight... we need God to give spiritual insight and moral clarity to the world."

We need to join in earnest prayer for this part of God's body, of which we are a part (I Cor. 12:26-27). If a member (Ukrainian, Russian, American) suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member (Ukrainian, Russian, American) is honored, all the members rejoice with it.

We must also pray for Russian citizens, who are suffering because they lack a voice, and in this emptiness are left only with a gnawing angry realization that their leaders have chosen a full-blown military attack on their closest Slavic neighbors—in many cases, relatives. Major media sources are giving a deceptive and totally one-sided picture.

I sense that Russian evangelicals have a better grasp of reality than does the Orthodox majority, although the most virulent anti-war letters of protest from Russia that I have received are from the Orthodox. These people too need our prayers.

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Tossed Aside

BY ALICE, WORKER TO THE MEDITERRANEAN



The sights, the smells, the sheer horror of it all continues to haunt me. Imagine with me for a moment, a place where the outcasts are tossed aside, shut away so as not to bother anyone. A place where the mentally unsound wander in a medicated haze; where the abandoned elderly stare in various states of distress; where the physically disabled are shut away. Imagine the young men and women who, too old for orphanages or juvenile detention centers, roam about with no other place to go.

These are the conditions of the sprawling adult asylum built into the walls at the back end of our old city. It's all the overworked, undertrained staff can do to maintain order and keep the occupants alive.

Slowly, a response to this situation has grown in the hearts of a small team of women, some who are called to people with exceptionalities and others to vulnerable women and girls. In our government system, women with exceptionalities are especially susceptible to exploitation. We hope to begin a home where they can live safely, with purpose and dignity. We wait and pray in faith that the Lord would lay on someone's heart to come here and make this their full-time work.

As we wait, I want to share with you the stories of three girls—two of whom are currently in the asylum and one who is in constant danger of being placed there. I met them when they came to the girls' protection center—an orphanage and juvenile detention center for girls aged five through eighteen—where I serve.

Hannah came to the center after she was discovered in the north with no papers and no family. Despite a great deal of effort to discover her identity, her origin is still a mystery. She was often violent and unmanageable, behavior which was not helped by the staff who beat her into submission.

In May of 2020, she turned eighteen and was placed in the asylum. A few months ago, we went to visit her, bringing practical gifts and some candies that used to make her happy. She was heavily medicated and didn't seem to recognize us or care about the gifts. It was heart-wrenching.

Shelly suffers from epilepsy, which is culturally stigmatized as associated with the demonic. When she turned eighteen, her

brother in another town took guardianship of her. At some point during the pandemic, she appeared in the asylum here in the city. She is nonresponsive and unaware of her surroundings—such a contrast from the smart, aware, high-functioning girl I knew at the center. I don't know if this change is because of medication or an event that happened at her brother's, but I do know that this precious image-bearer has been abandoned by her family.

Tabitha arrived at the girls' protection center nearly a decade ago. She was around ten years old, and people thought she was deaf and "crazy." Through the work of colleagues and other professionals, she was diagnosed as severely autistic and clearly traumatized from abuse and neglect. We found that she was hearing, and could learn with patience and understanding.

Last year, she aged out of the center. With nowhere else to go, Tabitha went to live with her birth mother, who tried to abandon her more than once. We continued to seek out a different long-term solution, while doing our best to teach Tabitha's mother how to work with her.

Recently, Leah, the former cook at the girls' center, took Tabitha into her home. Leah has known Tabitha since she was ten years old, and wants to care for her—although she needs training in how to care for a person with autism. Please pray that qualified professionals would come to work in this culture so that people with exceptionalities can be nurtured in the ways they so desperately need.

These three stories are but a glimpse into the population of girls whom the Lord has laid on our hearts. We are hopeful as we see the Father heart of God for these girls we love—and agonized as we wait and pray, knowing that each day they are uncared for. We must trust that our Father is in the asylum even when we can't be. Please remember Hannah, Shelly, Tabitha—and others whose names we don't yet know—in your prayers. 🙏

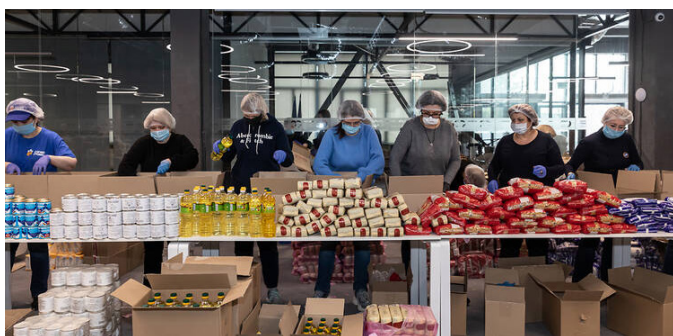
Names and locations have been changed or omitted for security purposes.



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Unity: An important Orthodox teaching point affirms that when people are drawn towards God, they draw closer to each other. A pastor in Mariupol, a city which has captured international media attention as it is being bombarded by the Russian military, responded harshly to Vlasenko's call for a day of fasting and prayer. He criticizes people who sing spiritual songs on Sunday when people are dying at the hand of government killers and liars. "False Christianity!" he cries.

Other voices understand the importance of a unified Christian position. Eleven Protestant seminaries from various countries in the region, including six in Ukraine—and significantly, two from Russia—issued a statement on February 25 denouncing the Russian invasion; Jesus is Lord, not Caesar. "We call on everyone to petition for a cessation of hostilities and to exert every possible influence on the Russian Federation in order to stop the unmotivated aggression toward Ukraine."



Advocacy: Viktor Sudakov, a Pentecostal pastor from Ekaterinburg, Russia, provided a link to allow people opposing the war to express themselves. The Pentecostal Union also released a statement emphasizing the evils of war and the importance of human souls. Within a few days, it garnered 960,000 signatures.

On March 12, Vlasenko issued a letter on behalf of the Russian Evangelical Alliance, expressing his bitterness and regret over decisions taken by his government. "I mourn what my country has done in its recent military invasion of another sovereign country, Ukraine... I wrote an open letter to President Vladimir Putin the day before the invasion in which I supported the request of the religious leaders of Ukraine for a peaceful solution to all conflict." Russian evangelical pastors also signed an open letter, available on the Mirt Publishing House website. "The time has come when each of us must call things by their real names. We call on the authorities of our country to stop the senseless bloodshed." In two days, it garnered 400 signatures before the site was shut down.

In Russia today, advocacy can be risky. Recent laws have prohibited the use of terms such as "war" and "fake" stories that don't conform to the government's stated position—this would include stories about Russian attacks on civilian targets and denying that Crimea is legally a part of Russia.

At the university where I worked I could freely express my opinions in public seminars, and over the years I appreciated the trust granted me. Since my return to America, most of my Russian acquaintances remain silent about the current

political situation, and their silence speaks louder than words. I believe a large part of the population does not approve of this military operation, but these people have no voice.

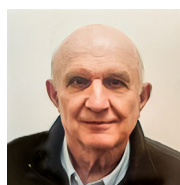
Relief aid: Almost every congregation is involved, in some way, by sending food and health packages to displaced people in neighboring Ukraine. Many Russian Protestants have relatives in the Donbass area. A century ago, MCC originated in Ukraine, and today this organization has re-established a flourishing Mennonite presence. Much of their current activity centers on helping refugees. A number of "Conservative Anabaptists" work in various parts of the country focusing on literature distribution, agricultural assistance, small business development, and church planting.

Concerns: I lament the "atomization" of the Slavic churches, and Western missionaries are partly culpable. Russian Baptists have traditionally been Arminian, but several powerful missionary groups promoted Calvinism which led to the creation of a new competing union. The schism between the Ukrainian and Russian Protestants provides fertile ground for conciliatory work. The hurts resulting from the so-called "underground" church of the Soviet era have yet to be healed completely.

Missionaries: They should routinely ask themselves about the impact of their activities twenty years down the road. What is the shape of the kingdom they have helped build? They should learn the language. I have asked numerous people who worked in Ukraine about their language of discourse. Almost everyone said they spoke, or heard, Russian. In today's environment, simply using the Russian language in Ukraine makes a political statement. When we live in a cross-cultural setting, we need to be sensitive and aware of political realities.

Aleksandr Pushkin, the Russian Shakespeare, has much to teach us. In Moscow's Pushkin Square stands a huge statue with words that resonate today. This great poet hopes that future generations will remember three things from his harsh era: that he "elicited good feelings among people, promoted freedom, and called for mercy to the downtrodden."

Today, protesters—even those with the courage to protest the war in Ukraine—gather in the shadow of this monument. I, too, have often stood there and reflected on those three qualities, almost biblical in their artistry. God would be pleased if people acted on the principles of love, freedom, and mercy. 🙏



Harley Wagler served with Eastern Mennonite Missions in Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, 1970-1982. In 1993 he began directing the Russian Studies Program in Nizhnii Novgorod, Russia, until it closed in 2010. He then continued teaching at Lobachevskii University in Nizhnii Novgorod until 2022, when he returned to his roots in Partridge, Kansas, where he attends Plainview Mennonite Church.

As of March 31, Rosedale International has received \$102,885 in total for Ukraine. Thank you to all who have partnered with us to support our Ukrainian siblings! Visit rosedaleinternational.org/ukraine/ to learn more or to donate towards relief.