

# WHERE IS UKRAINE?

How a western outlook perpetuates myths about Europe's largest country

by Olesya Khromeychuk

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Let's perform an experiment, the same one I do with my students of modern European history at the start of the academic year. Visualise the map of Europe. And now visualise the easternmost border of what you think of as Europe. Where is this border? Will it stretch as far as the Urals? If it runs along the eastern side of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, what does it do when it reaches Belarus? Is Belarus in, or is it out? Once the line gets to northern Ukraine, where does it go from there? Does it go farther east to encompass the whole of Ukraine? Kharkiv? Donbas? Will it run along the western border of Ukraine, leaving Lviv and Uzhhorod outside of Europe? Or do you visualise the easternmost border of your mental map of Europe, as do most of my students of modern European history, running along the Dnipro River, splitting Ukraine in half? And, if so, what does it do when it gets to the Black Sea? Where does Crimea fit on the map inside your mind?

Our mental maps are formed from the places we visit, the languages we understand, the literature we read, the culture we appreciate, the people we meet and care about. Our mental maps are just as important as those used in classrooms and war rooms. Ukraine has existed on the official map of Europe for at least 30 years. Placenames were misspelled, the definitive article added before the

name for no good reason. But it was there, printed and coloured. The largest country in Europe. Yet it was mostly missing from our mental maps.

Are we able to name a 'Ukrainian Shostakovich', a 'Ukrainian Solzhenitsyn', a 'Ukrainian Akhmatova'? Can we tell when someone presented as a Russian avant-garde artist, or a Russian filmmaker, or a Russian playwright, is actually Ukrainian? Did we spot that Degas' 'Russian Dancers' were actually wearing Ukrainian outfits before the National Gallery renamed the drawing in April 2022, finally releasing them from the Russian imperial embrace? The gallery itself seems only to have spotted it in the context of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the pressure to decolonise its art collection.

Russia's attack on Ukraine on 24 February 2022 demonstrated that understanding of the region among politicians, journalists and societies more widely was lacking. As the Director of the Ukrainian Institute London and a historian, I received numerous requests for commentary in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine. Most began with a question asking me to elaborate on the actual difference between Russia and Ukraine. The question was well meant; it was intended to debunk Putin's weaponised mythology. But the interviewers were oblivious to their own entrapment in the imperialist framework even as they attempted to give Ukraine a ▶

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voice. This framework has been cultivated by years of uncritical reading of Russia and, more recently, aggressively propagated by Putin. Weary of giving a ‘proper’ answer (starting with Volodymyr the Great and ending with Volodymyr Zelenskiy) for the umpteenth time, I asked one journalist a question in return: “What, exactly, is the difference between Ireland and England?” Instead of an answer, I heard a nervous giggle. We have mostly figured out the inappropriateness of asking such questions related to western empires. But we are not yet as skilled at seeing the same inappropriateness when it comes to other empires.

It soon became obvious that, even in the middle of a full-scale attack, western observers viewed Ukraine simply as a pawn in a geopolitical game being played by Russia and the collective West. Some were beating their chests and saying “Yes, Ukraine’s agency has been overlooked. We will have no more conversations about Ukraine without Ukraine.” And yet, many panels went ahead with no in-house Ukraine experts or no Ukraine experts at all.

The question we need to ask ourselves in the curatorial rooms of galleries and museums, in academia, in think tanks, on political advisory boards, is why, until Ukraine was attacked, had we not thought of securing mandatory in-house expertise on the largest country in Europe? Why had we thought of a nation of over 40 million as small and insignificant? Why had we chosen to dismiss its culture as minor? Why had we decided that learning the Ukrainian language was pointless because ‘they all speak Russian there anyway’? The answers to these questions are likely to be uncomfortable. They are likely to speak to our own prejudices, and conscious and unconscious biases.

The uncritical reading of Russian history and culture made many observers blind to Putin’s neo-imperialism. They were thus shocked by the invasion, by the fabricated reasons the Kremlin chose to justify the attack, and the brutality of the Russian military campaign, including war crimes of which we are learning more and more every day. The experiential knowledge of Russian imperialism and resistance to it possessed by Ukrainians and others in the region – for instance, the Baltic States, Poland and Finland – if taken seriously, could have better prepared 21st-century Europe for Russia’s full-scale invasion of a sovereign state. Maybe it could have

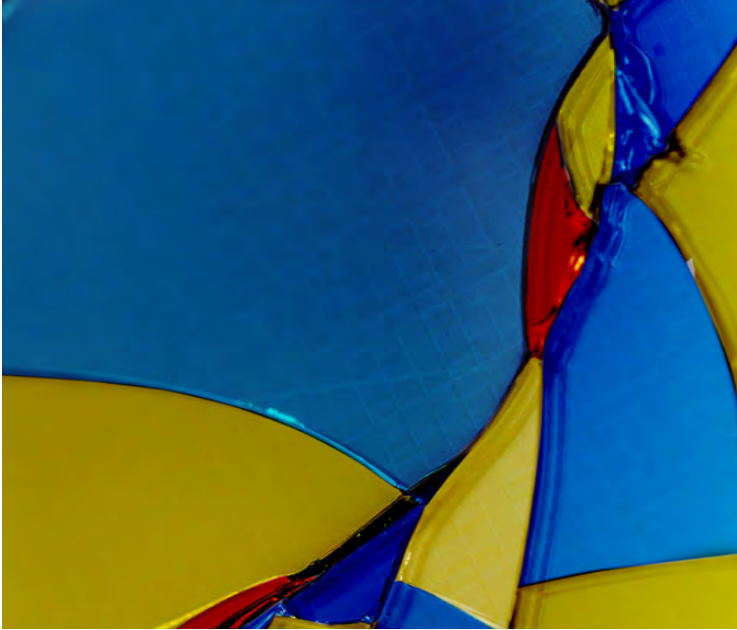
even prevented it altogether. At the least, it might have awakened us from our slumber of inaction in 2014, when Crimea and Donbas were occupied.

In 2014, we watched the ‘Russian world’ brought to life in Crimea, where Crimean Tatars were targeted en masse, in a way reminiscent of the persecution they suffered in 1944. The ‘Russian world’ where all, including ethnic Russians, could be sent to jail on fabricated charges simply for disagreeing with the occupation. We watched the ‘Russian world’ unfold in Donbas, too, where a gallery was overtaken by the Russian proxies, modern art executed, literally, with guns, and the space turned into a concentration camp where civilians were illegally kept, tortured and deprived of all rights.

How many of us responded to the creation of this ‘Russian world’ by introducing a discussion on the culture of Crimean Tatars and its repression by Russian imperial or Soviet power? How many proposed to curate an exhibition or a talk by the artists exiled from Donbas? How many, after visiting one of numerous exhibitions on the centenary of the Russian Revolution, left a critical entry in the visitor’s book about a Ukrainian filmmaker presented as Russian? How many reviewed a book by an author who witnessed war crimes in the Russian-occupied territories of eastern Ukraine for an English-language outlet? And as we reviewed the growing number of books on what was termed the ‘Ukraine crisis’ penned by western scholars, how many commented that such books should really try to reference Ukrainian sources?

Scholars of Ukraine have been doing all this for years. And, for years, we have been viewed as killjoys spoiling the party. Being a vocal Ukrainianist meant being perceived like an angry woman who will not stop screeching about the patriarchy. Suddenly, though, there is a desire to hear Ukrainian voices, even if just to figure out how to pronounce the name of the capital of Ukraine: we all now know it shouldn’t be ‘Kiev’, but how on earth are you meant to say ‘Kyiv’?

Hearing Ukrainian voices is good, but it is not enough. Just as it is good, but not enough, to set up emergency funds for Ukrainian scholars and artists. ‘Emergency’ implies temporary. For the duration of the war only. A systemic change would require setting up centres for the study of the region, including Ukraine. And if the funding was



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to be found for such a centre, some imagination would be required when coming up with a name for it. ‘Russian and Eurasian’ will no longer work if the centre wishes to study the entire region in a meaningful way. Here is a suggestion: how about the Lesia Ukrainka Centre for the Study of Europe? After all, Ukrainka is one of Ukraine’s foremost writers; best known for her poems and plays, she knew nine languages in addition to Ukrainian and translated works from English, German, French and Greek. What better patron for a new centre than a fin-de-siecle modernist, feminist writer who rewrote European classical myths from the point of view of a woman in the language of the subaltern?

What we need is a permanent alteration – decolonisation, de-imperialisation – of our knowledge. We need to equip ourselves with appropriate terminology to discuss the region not just as ‘post-Soviet’, but in ways that will reflect the different trajectories taken by the former republics in the three decades since the collapse of the USSR and how each tackled the legacy of the Russian as well as Soviet empire over this time.

Knowledge is not only about power; it is also a matter of security. The mental maps our students form in their classrooms will be carried with them into galleries, newsrooms, boardrooms, parliaments, military barracks and, of course, back into classrooms by the next generation of educators. If Ukraine does not exist on these mental maps,

its existence on the actual map of the world will continue to be at risk.

Self-reflection and the expansion of our knowledge is a good start. But that, too, is not enough. I have seen Russia experts who wish to improve their understanding of Ukraine lament that they cannot become Ukraine experts overnight. But that is not what they are asked to do. In fact, they are asked to do the opposite: to not try to explain Ukraine. To not speak on panels on Ukraine unless those panels have Ukraine experts. And not just one expert tucked on at the end to tick the box of a ‘Ukrainian voice’, like a woman scholar who discusses gender on the last panel scheduled on the last day of a conference. Inclusivity is not about adding all subjects to the list. It is about making sure that the discussion is fair. And that means using our expertise in a politically responsible way.

It is the Russia experts who were well placed to warn us that widespread support of Putin’s annexation of Crimea meant that the Russians could be expected to show the same widespread support, and not condemnation, of Putin’s so-called ‘special operation’ of shelling civilians, looting and pillaging in Ukraine. It is these experts who could have warned us that annual Victory Day parades – which included driving around in cars with stickers that said, “To Berlin for German women!” or “We can do it again!” – were not just a peculiar Russian way of commemorating the Second World War. That ►



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there was a chance that they would do it again. Not taking seriously the Russian *pobedobesie* – a violent Victory Day frenzy complete with rape culture, hate speech and glorification of violence – is the result of our acceptance of the vision of Russia not as a perpetrator, but as an ally of the West, a victor in and a victim of the Second World War, and thus not obliged to face up to the crimes committed by its own government and its own army.

The Russians’ choice to reject the term ‘Second World War’ in favour of the anachronistic ‘Great Patriotic War’ should have set off alarm bells, as it highlights that, for Russia, the war began in 1941, when Hitler attacked the USSR, not in 1939, when the USSR attacked Europe together with Hitler. The Russian army continued the legacy of the Soviet armed forces with its cult of violence, bullying, acceptance of war crimes and disregard for human life, not only that of the enemy – whether military or civilian – but of its own personnel. It perfected this criminal behaviour in Chechnya and Syria and, for the last eight years, in Ukraine.

Yet, somehow, it is the Ukrainian armed forces that are being dissected by journalists and scholars today: does the Azov regiment hold far-right views or does it not? This discussion is being had in a great many articles I have read about Russia’s war in Ukraine. However, few of these texts point out that, in 2019, after Putin had already attacked Ukraine and long after the formation of Azov and its incorporation

into the National Guard, all the Ukrainian nationalist parties put together received just above 2% of the vote in Ukraine, meaning that they did not meet the 5% threshold for admission to parliament. Few point out that, at the same time, in France, Italy and Germany the far right won between 10% and 17% of the vote. Not to mention the popularity of a certain presidential candidate who delivered the biggest ever share of the French vote to the far right in her race against President Emmanuel Macron in France’s recent (April 2022) general election.

Even fewer contemplate what ideology drives the Russian soldiers who are sent on the mission to ‘de-nazify’ Ukraine and kill the very Russophone civilians they are meant to ‘liberate’ from their Jewish, Russophone president. The same ideology that drives them not only to kill Ukrainians by shelling their cities, claiming they had been aiming to kill the Azov fighters, but by shooting civilians with their hands tied behind their backs in the back of their heads.

Could the ‘great Russian culture’ have anything to do with this ideology? Have we done enough to critically examine the imperialism inherent in the often-aggressive attitude towards Ukraine that we find in poets from Pushkin to Brodsky? But surely it is the fault of Putin, not Pushkin. Many in the West are reluctant to boycott Russia, especially Russian culture. It seems too violent a move to many.

Let me make a different suggestion: let us boycott the remnants of our own imperialist view of the world and focus our energies on getting to know the culture that doesn't seem to be there: Ukrainian culture.

Where is the 'Ukrainian Pushkin' after all? If he doesn't exist on our bookshelves, does it mean that he doesn't exist at all? And if he is to be found on our bookshelves, is he there by accident? I once got excited in a London bookshop when I spotted a book with Taras Shevchenko, the 19th-century Ukrainian Romantic poet, the 'father of the nation', on the cover. I thought a badly needed new translation of Shevchenko's *Kobzar* must finally have been published. When I picked it up, it turned out to be Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. The publisher must have thought that any moustached man in a big coat and furry hat would do for the cover of a book about the mysterious Russian soul.

Taras Shevchenko. Lesia Ukrainka. Ivan Franko. Olha Kobylanska. Maik Iohansen. Mykola Kulish. Vasyl Stus. Lina Kostenko. Oksana Zabuzhko. Boris Khersonskiy. Serhy Zhadan. Olena Stiazhkina. Iryna Shuvalova. The vast majority of those reading this will not know these names. This literature is absent from our shelves not because it is not worthy, but because its existence has been systematically undermined through political repression, as well as scarce linguistic knowledge and chronic lack of funding for translations. Another uncomfortable truth is that these authors do not live on our shelves because our cultural appetite for the whole of eastern Europe is easily satisfied by Dostoyevsky.

The sudden appearance of Ukraine in the limelight has not yet brought about a better understanding of the country. Paradoxically, western admiration of and surprise at Ukrainian bravery in the face of Russian aggression merely emphasise the limited knowledge we possess about Ukraine. When we admire the resilience of Ukrainians, let us think of what turns ordinary people into heroes. What would it take for us, civilians, perhaps pacifists, to pick up arms or at least to donate all we can to the army? I do not know what drove my brother, Volodya, a civilian, an artist, a reader, to enlist in the Ukrainian Armed Forces in 2015, but I know it was not the desire to become a hero. Especially a dead hero.

Glorifying Ukrainian resilience without understanding its roots is another form of

misunderstanding the country and its people. The root of that resilience is the intolerance of imperialist oppression, both historic and recent. It is the knowledge that, although Ukraine is the largest country in Europe, people still do not see it and might not even notice if it disappeared from the map. It is thus up to Ukrainians, all 40 million of them, to make sure that their country stays on the map with its borders intact. It is up to all of us to make sure that it appears on our mental maps. And that it stays there. With its borders intact. ■

■ *A version of this text was delivered as the keynote speech at the British Association of Slavonic and East European Studies Conference, Cambridge, 8 April 2022*

## RSA Fellowship in action

### Tackling Covid-19 in Cambodia

Thanks to a £2,000 Catalyst Grant, education charity United World Schools (UWS) delivered a Covid-19 community awareness campaign in Cambodia that reduced the spread of the virus. The money enabled UWS to support teachers in disseminating life-saving health information to hundreds of people in 10 communities via posters, social media, meetings and radio broadcasts. The programme extended to ethnic minority groups that are usually beyond the reach of the Cambodian government and NGOs.

UWS expanded the campaign with the assistance of local teachers and leaders, benefiting almost 100,000 people in 116 rural communities with up-to-date information about the virus and advice on social distancing and hygiene. The programme significantly restricted the movement of Covid-19 in remote regions with very limited access to medical care.

"Communicating these public health messages is the most effective and, in some highly remote areas, the only tool available to combat Covid-19," says UWS Founding Chief Executive Tim Howarth, FRSA. "As the programme scaled up, UWS education officers also utilised socially distanced community visits to train teachers and disseminate accurate Covid-19 information to local community leaders. This allowed schools to safely reopen in 2021 and strengthened local leadership networks for the long term."

All donations received by UWS from the public between 21 April and 20 July 2022 are being matched by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

■ *Find out more at [www.unitedworldschools.org](http://www.unitedworldschools.org)*