iM
The flow of history

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Per Nyholm

TEXT: PER NYHOLM

Quite some time ago I sat in
a car en route from Crimea
to Kyiv and further up to
the coast of the Baltic Sea. I
looked out across Ukraine,
this fat, rich land, out across
the famous black soil. I was
thrilled by the thought
that I travelled through,
what was for me an almost
unknown part of Europe.
Tat’s right, Europe!

Time and again I tried to
read a couple of pages in the
books I had brought along,
on the history of Ukraine,
on its culture, its nature, its
people. It wasn’t easy. Winter
tyres and Ukrainian highways
don’t mix well. Still, I
managed to fnd out that
following the First World
War, when the Ukrainians
tried to break away from
Russian dominance – exactly
as the Balts, the Poles, and the
Finns did successfully – they
encountered no sympathies
from the West. Barely
anybody had ever heard of
them, really, and the fact
that they presented such
a claim was just another
inconvenience on top of all
the other problems presented
to the peacemakers in Paris.
Other Eastern and Central
European peoples were well-
known, and they were either
cut in or cut out. But who
were the Ukrainians, and why
couldn’t they just stay with the
Russians? In Berlin, German
Foreign Secretary Rathenau
believed that the newly-
established Soviet Union
would probably evolve in a
democratic direction. Maybe
the Ukrainians should stay
put. An American diplomat
suggested a Ukrainian-
Russian federal state á la the
United States.

UKRAINE TELLS
THE STORY of wasted
opportunities, not just the
ones the Ukrainians wasted
themselves, partly because
they knew very little about
state craft, about the art and
cunning and guile needed to
create a state. But Ukraine also
– and especially – tells
the story of opportunities
spurned by the West. For this
latter part, there is no excuse.
In the West we know how
to establish and run states,
nation states, federations,
empires, colonies, you name
it. T e Western attitude to
Ukraine was, and still is to
a large extent, determined
by indiference towards
a European culture – not
just a postal address or a bus
stop – containing 45 million
inhabitants, nowadays living
in a state, a political state and
to a certain degree a state of
chaos, but surely a state with
an enormous potential,
a people which is historically
European and wishes to be
European.

Some Danes may remember
a few years ago, when a
somewhat unimportant
member of the
European Parliament
claimed that Ukraine could
not be considered European.
When Pierre Collignon, a
journalist from the Danish
newspaper Jyllands-Posten,
asked in bafement about
her reasons for making such
a statement, she answered
triumphantly: Where are the
Ural Mountains located? Yes,
where indeed, and what does
their location have to do with
Ukraine? Karin Riis Jørgensen
from the Danish liberal party
Venstre – because she was the
one – has since learned a great
deal about Eastern Europe,
including that she knows very

litte. Even that is something.
At the time of her utterance,
she was perfectly in line with
then United States President
George Bush Sr., who, in
his equivocal and infamous
“Chicken Kyiv”-speech to
the Ukrainian parliament in
August 1991, recommended
that the Ukrainians remain
in the Soviet Union, which
just a few months later came
to lay on the dust heap of
history.

OF COURSE politicians
are entitled to their opinions,
but knowledge would
also be preferable, just a
bit of it, I thought, while
we were approaching the
town of Poltava, where
Ukrainian hopes of national
independence were crushed
in 1709 following Charles
XII’s defeat at the hands of
Peter I the Great (Ukrainian
Hetman Ivan Mazepa had
imprudently joined forces
with the Swedish king). But
why does re-election seem to
be the only ambition of these
very politicians, best achieved
by any means foolish or
cynical or both? Do we not
have a right to expect from
our leaders that they do at
least part of their homework
before they speak. Do we
not have the right to expect
of them that just now and
then they think as statesmen,
that they think not just of
tomorrow, but of the next
generation?

Poltava was a disaster,
not so much for the
combative Swedes, who
subsequently adopted a more
realistic measure of their own
military capacity, but for
Ukraine, which the Russians
now in earnest began to
Russianize. Ukraine slipped
from the Western sphere

of consciousness, having
found itself on the verge of
Renaissance infuence. With
force and violence, Ukraine
was transformed frst into a
Russian landscape and since
into a Soviet one, kept quiet
by famines carefully schemed
by the Communists. Seen
from the Western capitals
Central Europe was a
diferent matter, more or
less within diplomatic reach
during the Cold War. Russia
existed because of her Tsars,
the Soviet Union because
of its nuclear rockets. But
what lay between Central
Europe and the Tsarist, later
Communist Russia, was
farther away from us than
the far side of the moon.
On the Poltava battlefeld,
I encountered a married
couple with two children in
tow. He was Ukrainian and
didn’t mind discussing the
lost independence and the
new state. She was Russian
and would say nothing
except that Ukraine could
not manage without Russia,
the country was simply too
small for that. I asked them
their names. She refused
to give hers, and strongly
emphasised to her husband
to remain silent. Tere, I
thought to myself, there we
have Ukraine’s dilemma.

Some people today might
be familiar with the writer
Jurij Andrukhovitj, but who
knows or wishes to know
Skovoroda, Sjevtsjenko,
Ivan Franko and other great
creators of Ukrainian culture?
Who ever acknowledges
the fact that from present
Ukraine – the part of Ukraine
that was under Habsburg rule
until the First World War
– emerged a whole generation
of brilliant writers and
poets, among them Gregor

von Rezzori, Paul Celan,
Rose Ausländer, Carl Emil
Franzos and Joseph Roth?
Tey might have spoken
German and felt Jewish
rather than Ukrainian, but
many of their tales and fables
were nonetheless inspired
by a Ukrainian-Galizian-
Magrebinian homeland.
Tus, they continue to give
evidence of Ukraine’s central
position in European life.

UKRAINE IS both
geographically, historically,
and culturally – but not
always politically – as
European as Denmark,
Portugal, Bulgaria and
other peripheral countries,
however, not outside as
Russia, whose current leaders
consider the democratic idea
a liability. With the risk of
being struck by Nemesis,
I happily proclaim my
confdence in Prime Minister
Yulia Tymoshenko, and
my complete confdence in
President Viktor Yushchenko.
Ukraine wishes to join
NATO and the EU. NATO
I regard as merely symbolic,
EU as reality. Ukraine is
likely to succeed with both.
I will even venture to claim
that by 2050, Danes will be
able to drive along excellent
freeways down to their
summer residences on the
Crimean Peninsula, without
ever having to remove their
passports from their pockets.

At the moment, Ukraine
is experiencing a national
renaissance that very
few thought possible a mere
25 years ago. Of course
there are problems and
crises! How could it be any
diferent given Ukraine’s
history, a history which in the
twentieth century alone cost
millions of innocent people
their lives during regimes
of terror, at times Russian-
Communist, and at others
Nazi-German? During my
trip across Ukraine, I more or
less followed the dividing line
between the Western and the
Eastern population groups,
the true frontier of the
present, the mental borderline
between Europe and Asia. Up
until this line, which currently
runs from St. Petersburg to
Minsk and onwards east of
Kyiv to Yalta, you can feel
the spirit of democracy; a
great achivement considering
its reach until that magic year
1989 from the Eastern suburbs
of Lübeck to the Adriatic. In
other words, this borderline
or frontier is moveable, and
it’s moving east. In Kremlin,
where a strictly controlled

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democracy is preferred to the
real commodity, critics voice
their outrage and dismay –
they’ve got some nerve, those
Ukrainian peasants, which
owe so much to Mother Russia
etc. Tat many Russians think
like their rulers should not be
held against them. Tey too,
have a history to put behind
them. Tey too, must fnd the
courage to live in freedom.
Times will change.

UKRAINE HAS been
part of Europe all along. Only
we were too lazy to realise
it. As I crossed the Dniepro
at Zaporizhia, I paused on
the dam and took in the
sight of that mighty river and
thought with Tolstoj that
you may try to give the river
of history a certain direction,
but you cannot stop it.
Ukraine will arrive at its
destination. And from there,
the current will continue its
onward sweep into the East.

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