



David Rieff

**The Moral Ambiguities
of Historical Memory:
Some Cultural Reflections
on the Ukrainian Past,
Present, and Possible Futures**

*За традицією навчальний рік в Національному університеті
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Починаючи з 1992 року могилянці мали можливість почути:

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Ярослава Грицака,
італійську славістку та україністку
Джованну Броджі-Беркофф
та багатьох інших видатних особистостей.*



David Rieff

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Present, and Possible Futures**

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Inaugural Lecture
Honorary Professor of the National University
"Kyiv-Mohyla Academy"
September 1, 2024



The well-known American writer-publicist and political analyst David Rieff writes about modern existential wars, which he has seen up close in many countries of the world. His main emphasis is on Ukraine's existential defensive war today.

The lecture is intended for a student audience and a wide audience of readers.

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Девід Ріфф

**Моральні неоднозначності історичної
пам'яті: деякі культурні рефлексії
про українське минуле, теперішнє
та можливості для майбутнього**

Київ



Видавничий дім «Києво-Могилянська академія»

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Відомий американський письменник-публіцист і політичний аналітик Девід Ріфф пише про сучасні екзистенційні війни, які він бачив зблизька в багатьох країнах світу. Його головний акцент на українській оборонній війні зараз.

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President Kvit, Honorary President Briukhovetskyi, NaUKMA faculty and staff, friends, distinguished guests, first year students and the loved ones of first year students present here this afternoon, I am profoundly grateful for and touched by the honor this university does me today. Whether I will ever be able to repay this debt of gratitude is something about which I am anything but certain. I can only say that my intention is to interpret the honorary professorship that you are conferring upon me as meaning that henceforth, whether I am in Ukraine – as I fully intend to be at least part of the time from today until such time as I am under the ground rather than above it – or I am abroad, I am at your disposal in whatever ways that I can be useful to you, to this university, and to this country. I am certainly under no illusions about the importance of such an engagement. For much as Ukraine has come to mean to me since I first came here in April of 2022, I would willingly give up the privilege – and for me it is a *great* privilege – of coming here every couple of months if my absence could be exchanged for a few more ATACMS or an F-16 for your armed forces. But since that is pure magical thinking on my part, such a bargain not, alas, being one that anyone in Washington or Brussels or Berlin is going to make with me, here I will remain, doing my best to become a very modest part of the

intellectual furniture of this university and, by extension, of the cultural and intellectual life of Ukraine during this terrible and heroic moment in its history, and also in the better days that hopefully will follow.

I want my remarks to be about Ukraine, not about me. Still, all of you are more than entitled to wonder what in God's name I am doing here. After all, I am a journalist and a writer, and even at its best and its most scrupulous, these two intertwined vocations are always morally ambiguous affairs. To name only the most obvious of their moral hazards, how is one to know where moral commitments stop and an immoral, or at least an amoral voyeurism begin? Ultimately, the question is an unanswerable one, and the best the writer can hope for is that what one what tries to contribute outweighs whatever vainglory or other questionable motivations are involved. And, as I say, giving oneself and being accorded the benefit of the doubt on this requires a leap of faith for both the visitor, which in the instance is to say me, and the visited, which in the instance is to say you. And in any case, in Kierkegaard's great phrase, while life can only be understood retrospectively, it must be lived prospectively. Even then I am not sure one can ever explain oneself to oneself, let alone to anyone else. In my own case, although actuarially speaking I am approaching the end of my own life, I doubt that I will ever understand entirely how and why I have lived it as I have. But if in fact there has been any intelligence involved at all in the design of my own life, I think that it has taken the form of, if you will forgive the fancy, what I will call that life's moral bookends. I turned forty in the fall of 1992,

watching alongside other journalists the evacuations of Bosniak prisoners from Trnopolje, one of the archipelago of concentration camps the Serbs had established in Northern Bosnia over the course of that summer, but were then shutting down. And I have passed much of my seventieth and seventy-first year, and in a few weeks' time will mark my seventy-second, in a second just war — Ukraine. In between — this is what I meant earlier when I spoke of bookends — I have reported on many wars: Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Israel-Palestine, Iraq, and Afghanistan, to name only some of them.

In the end, old age caught up with me, and when I realized that I could no longer run, I threw off the motley of the war correspondent for good...or at least so I thought. And I think I was right to do so. The last thing I want is for some twenty-two year old to get shot in the lung because I am too arthritic to clamber out of a trench or scamper across a field. But if I am being honest, while no one in his or her right mind is glad to grow old, I was not so sorry as I had expected to bid farewell to all that. For none of the wars I reported on after Bosnia seemed morally clear in the way that Bosnia had. To the contrary, each appeared to confirm the then prevailing humanitarian and 'human rightsist' understanding of the world, which is to say the conviction that none of these wars should have happened, that there was no just side, even if occasionally one could say one party to the conflict could be called the lesser of two evils, that for the most part all those responsible for these wars would in a better world have been thought of not as leaders but rather as enemies of the human race, and

that only their victims deserved one's solidarity. But then along came Ukraine, whose cause seemed to me as clear cut morally as Bosnia's had been. And because I believe that so completely – and I assure you such belief does not come easily to me; to the contrary, my intellectual default position is to see moral ambiguity in almost everything – I find myself back in the world of war, risking my now very arthritic neck in Ukraine's cause, hoping that I am more useful to you than I am a burden. It is no sacrifice, I assure you; indeed, from a moral point of view, I cannot think of an easier assignment. And besides, I know of no better feeling than doing what one is good at it. Yes of course, I'm quite obviously too old to be doing any of this. But I have found this to make it all the more precious. And old age is here, which means that death is around the corner anyway. So when people in Ukraine say to me, as they often do, "Why do you keep coming back here?", my answer is always the same: it is a privilege.

* * *

George Orwell once wrote that, "Every war, when it comes, or before it comes, is represented not as a war but as an act of self-defense against a homicidal maniac." And as a general historical rule, he was right. But just as I am certain that he would see the cause of the Spanish Republic's alas unsuccessful resistance to Franco's fascism in whose cause which he fought and during which he was very badly wounded, and the subsequent successful war against Nazi Germany, as exceptions to that general rule, I believe that the Bosniaks' resistance

to the Serbs between 1992 and 1995 and yours against the forces of the latest iteration of the Russian Empire, are every bit as much exceptions to that general rule that most wars are not worth fighting as the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War in Europe had been. For to call Slobodan Milosevic or Vladimir Putin homicidal maniacs is not the propagandistic oversimplification of reality that Orwell was warning against, but, to the contrary, a plain statement of fact. To insist on this does not mean that either the Bosnians in the first part of the nineteen-nineties or you Ukrainians today are saints – war brutalizes everyone to some extent and always and with no exceptions involves the slaughter of innocents, and to be clear those innocents are never, ever solely on one's own side. But it is to say that in Ukraine today, as in Bosnia thirty-two years ago, one side is in the right and the other in the wrong. The corollary of this is that sometimes one's enemies simply are homicidal maniacs. Looking back at the concentration camps the Serbs established in Northern Bosnia in 1992, or at the torture mills that the Russians have been so quick to establish and continue to maintain in virtually in every part of Ukraine they occupy, if anything homicidal maniac seems to me to be an understatement.

I have spoken of Bosnia as a just war but when I first went there for the first time, in the summer of 1992, I did not yet have the language to describe it in this way. To the contrary, I was then so ignorant of the place that in my pitch to *The New Yorker* magazine, which first sent me there, I alluded to wanting to report on “ethnic cleaning”

instead of the correct term, which is "ethnic cleansing". I predicted that the assignment would take me about three weeks. Instead, I ended up staying in Bosnia for the better part of three years. And if I remained, it was because, as I have said, I soon came to believe in the justice of the Bosnian cause. The morality of their resistance seemed as clear as crystal — they, the Bosniaks, were the victims, while the Serbs, and, though more ambiguously, the Croats, were their victimizers. But I did not yet have the language with which to justify that belief in any intellectually and philosophically grounded and serious sense. Yes, I had my indignation, my outrage, but in my view at least such fundamentally emotional responses, however admirable they may be, are, to put it charitably, often untrustworthy, usually unsustainable, and almost invariably fickle. I wish it were otherwise, but if half long lifetime spent bearing witness to other people's tragedies and trying to convey those tragedies to audiences living far away from them has taught me anything, it is that we human beings are not altruism machines, and, alas, more often than not our moral indignation comes with one might call an ethical sell-by date. That was what the great Leonard Cohen meant by his lyric, "I mistrust my inner feelings/inner feelings come and go."

But the truth does not come and go. Whatever the cultural relativists may say, anyone who talks about my truth rather than the truth is not in fact talking about the truth at all but about themselves, about their feelings. It is true that you cannot fight a war without emotions — the flag, the national anthem, and the rest. But you cannot

fight a just war, the existential war for your survival as a nation and as a people that you Ukrainians are fighting now, without the truth in all its adamantine rigor. In my own case, I only found a language that seemed to me to set out what a just war was and what it was not when, in the mid nineteen-nineties, after the Bosnian War had come to its very unjust conclusion, I began to read Catholic Just War Theory. For those who do not know it, though Just War Theory has also there I found the most profound moral arguments I know – at least for anyone who is not a sincere Pacifist – in defense of the belief that wars are sometimes necessary; indeed, sometimes imperative. A philosophical aside is required here since a moral philosopher or a historian of ideas will rightly ask why I became so focused on the 'Catholic' rather than 'Christian' iteration of Just War Theory, given that there is a hugely important Protestant tradition of thinking about just war that goes back to Hugo Grotius in early 17th century Holland and to the German jurist Samuel von Pufendorf in the latter part of that century and continues into the 20th century in the work of the great Protestant theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr (Orthodoxy has its own Just War Theory, but at least in the case of the Russian Orthodox Church, its utter subservience to the Russian State, that is, the elevation of the good of the state over everything else, which now includes the disgusting and all too widespread practice of blessing weapons, would seem to make a mockery of its own traditions in this regard). What makes Catholic Just War Theory more powerful to me is that it is more than a philosophical

tradition, as in the case of both Protestant and secular Just War Theory, but rather is part of the Catechism of the Catholic Church and is thus morally authoritative for all faithful Catholics.

Simply put, Catholic Just War Theory, which derives first from the writing both of St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas and continues through the interpretations of Aquinas by his great 16th century Spanish disciple, the Dominican friar, Francisco de Vitoria, and his lesser known contemporary, the Italian Jesuit theologian Roberto Bellarmine, holds that for a war to be just, two principles must be fully met. The first, known as *just ad bellum*, holds that a war must have a just cause, while the second requirement, *jus in bello*, demands justice in the means with which the war is fought. This second element is in many ways the more important of the two. For while it is fairly easy to think of wars fought in a just cause, few even of these – and most wars are simply unjust, full stop, struggles between two sets of swine in which one's moral sympathies belong with those wars' victims rather with either belligerent – have been fought justly.

For this, Catholic Just War Theory sets a very high threshold for what qualifies. To begin with, in practice if not altogether in theory, only defensive wars are justifiable, which means, to take an extreme case, that a war fought to abolish slavery in another country would probably not be considered just even if waged with the noblest of intentions. There is also an obligation that all realistic peace efforts have been exhausted and that no outside power that protect a country from aggression.

In other words, war must always be a last recourse. And even if these criteria are met, a war's moral legitimacy depends on other stringent conditions. As laid out in the Catechism, these are: first, that "the damage inflicted by the aggressor on the nation or community of nations must be lasting, grave, and certain"; second, that "all other means of putting an end to it must have been shown to be impractical or ineffective"; third, that "there must be a serious prospect of success"; and fourth, that "the use of arms must not produce evils or disorders greater than the evil to be eliminated."

This final point is crucial, both in its moral vindication of certain wars and in the stringent standards it sets for such vindication. For any moral justification of war that does not concede from the outset that war is evil is not worth taking seriously. That is because even the most just of wars fought with the most stringent effort to avoid the slaughter of innocents is inevitably going to cause the slaughter of innocents. It is because such slaughter is not just a possible but rather an *inevitable* consequence of all wars, just and unjust alike, that gives Pacifist arguments their moral force. But it imposes on those of us who are not Pacifists to moral obligation to justify why even those few wars that one believes are being waged in a just cause qualify as just wars.

And by this yardstick, few turn out to qualify. The obvious example at this moment is the Gaza War. There are many arguments that can be made both by those who support Palestine and those who support Israel that their respective causes are just. But it is

almost impossible to make a serious case that either side is fighting the war justly. It is important to emphasize that Catholic Just War Theory's criteria for fighting a war justly is not the impossible requirement that those waging such a just war never not do evil things. What Catholic Just War Theory does demand, however, is that the evil and disorder wrought by the just side must not be greater than the evil being resisted. And self-evidently, the determination is anything but a simple one. The classic case of this is the US decision to drop the nuclear bombs that in 1945 obliterated the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Those who justified the action did so by saying it would bring the war to an end, and thus save more lives than it would extinguish. Those who abhor the decision claim that it created a greater evil than the one it sought to eliminate.

But the fact that most wars are unjust, and that even other wars fought in the name of just causes are fought unjustly and, speaking for myself, seem to defy any effort to choose sides, does not mean that there are no just wars. And in our time Ukraine *is* that just war, just as, in my view the independence of Bangladesh was in the early 1970s and the military struggle of the ANC in the 1980s. In the case of Ukraine, the elements demanded by the Catechism in order to be able to call a war just have been entirely met. The first, that the damage the invader seeks to cause is "lasting, grave, and certain" is not open to question. The Russians deny even the existence of Ukraine of a nation (so-called Ukraine is the way the country is referred to on

Russian television), as a culture (Ukrainian culture is just a junior part of Russian culture, and of *Russkiy Mir*, "The Russian World"), and as an identity ("Ukrainians are bewitched Russians" is the way one popular Russian commentator often formulates it). The sad truth, proven over and over and over again, from Sudan to Myanmar, Kyiv to Gaza, DRC to Yemen, is that while I wish that my friends in the human rights world had been correct in saying that, albeit painfully and infuriatingly slowly, we had shifted from the Westphalian order of nation states and realpolitik to a new international order of rights, the reality is that these ideas were based on a functioning international community of functioning institutions and shared moral values, and, as you Ukrainians know to your terrible cost, that 'community' has proved to be chimera, and now lies buried under the rubble of half a century's hopes. Vladimir Putin's twenty-first century is closer in outlook to Thucydides' "Melian Dialogue" in which the negotiators for the powerful Athenian army besieging the small Republic of Melos dismiss the Melians' appeal to justice, responding that in the real world, justice is only relevant to disputes between equal powers. Otherwise, the Athenians insist, "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must."

Another of Catholic Just War Theory's requirements, that the damage done by the aggressor be "lasting, grave, and certain," is being demonstrated everyday in Ukraine. The Russian way of war is to destroy everything in its path. That was what Putin's army did to Grozny in 2001, destruction that two years later led the United Nations

to designate the Chechen capital as "the most destroyed city on earth." It was what that same army did to Aleppo in 2016. And it is what Russia did to the Ukrainian city of Mariupol in 2022. Without sufficient air defenses, and the skill and dedication of those who operate them, can anyone doubt Kharkiv, Dnipro, Odesa, Kyiv, and Lviv would not eventually suffer the same fate? This is what the firebrands on Russian television call for nightly, and given that this is what Russia has done so many times elsewhere, only a fool would not take them at their word.

A third requirement of Catholic Just War Theory is that all other options than war have been tried and proven ineffective. And there are those who argue that Ukraine could have offered Russia more concessions in negotiations in the run-up to the full-scale invasion. But the concessions in question were basically that Ukraine accept recolonization by Russia, or, more precisely reabsorption into *Russkiy Mir*. Anyone doubting this should read Vladimir Putin's essay, "On The Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians", which he published in July of 2021. Ukraine and Russia, he writes, are essentials "parts of the same historical and spiritual space," and Ukrainian nationalism is nothing more than an effort to "sow discord among people, the overarching goal being to divide and then to pit the parts of a single people one against the other."

Those who believe that Ukraine should have been more conciliatory toward Russia are guilty of what, in first year philosophy, is called a category mistake. For the fundamental issue was never Russia's anxieties

about NATO expansion, let alone the rights of Russian-speakers in Ukraine. It was Ukraine's right to exist. For as far as Putin is concerned, Ukrainian nationhood is by definition an anti-Russian project. And you cannot negotiate with an adversary who denies your existence, the legitimacy of your national project, and the validity of your cultural identity. It is true that between Ukraine's formal independence in 1991 and what Ukrainians call the Revolution of Dignity in 2014, Russia was willing to accept the existence of a Ukraine that was formally independent as long as its subservience to Russia was understood. But the moment the Ukrainians chose real independence, which is what the 2014 revolution in the Maidan was all about, Russia chose war, first with the conquest and annexation of Crimea in the late winter of that year, and then, that spring, by the war in Eastern Ukraine. And when Ukraine did not bend, Putin opted for the full scale invasion of February of 2022.

Against this invasion, Ukraine's resistance has been heroic; it has surprised the world, perhaps it has even surprised you Ukrainians yourselves. But can that resistance be sustained? The honest answer is that, at this point, it is impossible to know. For we are still deep in Clausewitz's proverbial 'fog of war.' But as far as fulfilling the final requirement of Catholic Just War Theory goes, which is that for a war to be just, the just side must have a reasonable chance of prevailing, there is no longer any question. Ukraine has proved that it can win, providing it gets the armaments it needs to do so. In short, if any modern war can be called just, it is Ukraine's fight against

Vladimir Putin's determination to make an example of their country as he continues his project of restoring the Russian Empire. And Russia's war of extermination against you is as far I know historically *sui generis* in that they want exterminate while at the same time asserting that you do not exist. Even the Athenians never denied that the Melians existed. There was no Athenian Solovoyov braying that the Melians were "bewitched Athenians". Both the Athenians and the Russians believed that they would easily prevail. But while the Athenians were right to believe they could crush the Melians, you Ukrainians have so far been able to prove Vladimir Putin wrong.

The bitter irony is that while the case of Ukraine validated Catholic Just War Theory, the Catholic Church itself seems bent on repudiating it. To be sure, Just War Theory remains part of the Catechism and thus is still doctrinally authoritative. But Church leaders beginning with Pius XII in the 1940s and 1950s, continuing with John XXIII in his encyclical *Pacem in Terris* in 1963, and now and most explicitly and frontally with Pope Francis' comments on the Russian war on Ukraine, have questioned its relevance. It was Pius XII who argued that the development of nuclear weapons. In 1953, while affirming that in principle nations had the right to go to war to defend themselves against unjust aggression, the development of nuclear weapons meant that the harms wrought by war could be so great that they would no longer be comparable to that caused by tolerating injustice. In such a case, he insisted, "We may be obliged to suffer injustice." Francis has gone much

further. "We can no longer think of war as a solution," he insisted in response to calls for him to support the cause of Ukraine against Russia, "because its risks will probably always be greater than its supposed benefits. In light of this, it is very difficult nowadays to invoke the rational criteria elaborated in earlier centuries to speak of the possibility of a 'just war' [the symbolically resonant quotation marks are Francis' own]." Instead, Francis demanded, "Never again war!"

How much of a role Francis' own leftwing Argentine Peronist worldview, with its ingrained anti-Americanism and its resulting knee-jerk indulgence toward anti-American regimes including that of Putin's Russia, played in his stance is impossible to know. For all that can be said against Pius XII's opposition to Just War Theory, at least he faced up to the injustice repudiating it would produce. Francis has shown none of this willingness to accept the consequences of his position. To simply say "Never again war" when, precisely, across the world, from Ukraine to Sudan and Gaza to Myanmar, ploughshares are being beaten into swords at Mach 2, while Ukraine is being destroyed piece by piece, coldly and deliberately by the armed forces of the Russian Federation, is not a principled position but rather one that in its willful refusal to acknowledge the here and now is little more than utopian hot air, whether or not Pope Francis' statements conceal a more odious agenda, as Ukrainians tend to believe — a view I largely share with them.

But whatever the Pope may imagine, the stark reality is this: for Ukraine to exist, it must resist.

Self-evidently, the most important form of your resistance is military, followed closed by economic resistance. But there is also cultural resistance, and it is on this last topic, and on the related one of what, for lack of a better term, we call collective memory, that I would like to address in the second half of these remarks. By culture, I do not only mean the arts, though the fact that writing, music, and the visual arts are flourishing in Ukraine at this moment seems to me an extraordinary emblem both of your resistance and the vitality (and also the deep historical roots) of the culture the Russians keep telling the world does not and never has existed. I also mean two other aspects of the cultural challenge that Ukraine faces. The first, of course, is the language question, both in the forward looking sense of what future, if any, the Russian language will have in Ukraine going forward, and in the rearward looking sense of what role, and here again I emphasize the caveat 'if any', Russian culture can or, to put it more polemically, should have in a postwar Ukraine. And the second is the one I referred to earlier, that of memory, of how not just to remember the past but how whatever consensus you Ukrainians come to about that remembrance, what both the benefits and risks to you as a society and as a polity any new memory politics are likely to be.

At the risk of offending you, those risks are not inconsequential. It is an article of faith today, not just here in Ukraine but virtually everywhere in the world, that it is by definition an untrammelled moral good to remember and a moral solecism to forget the past, above

all its tragedies. And one understands perfectly why this is so: to deny the horrors of the past is in a certain sense to give a posthumous victory to those who were responsible for them and inflict one more wound on those who were the victims. The denial of the Holodomor is a paradigmatic example of this, and no one but a Soviet nostalgic could pretend otherwise. Mercifully, such people have largely disappeared from the intellectual scene in Ukraine, though unfortunately their influence in some of the most distinguished academic institutions in the West – Berlin's Freie Universität is a particularly egregious example of this – and on the debate over Ukraine in the Western European and Latin American left is anything but trivial. What complicates matters, both ethically and historically, is that the project of creating a national consciousness involves not just the acknowledgement of a nation's tragedies but the assertion of a national myth. And here, as you know very well, things become more complicated.

For myths are not history, much as we might wish it otherwise, nor are collective memories, by which I refer not to people's individual, contemporaneous memories but to the collective memories handed down – and, as such, inevitably altered over the course of time! – from the generation that experienced them to the future generations that did not. In his history of Ukraine, Yaroslav Hrytsak argues that, "The cumulative image of Ukraine from folk songs provides the foundations of the Ukrainian national myth." To be clear, Hrytsak is certainly not denouncing such myth making. "Myths

don't mean a lie or a deliberate distortion," he writes. But he goes on to insist that, "As with any historical myth, we cannot demand historical accuracy from the folk myth of 'Cossack Ukraine'." In this sense, as the German historian Jens-Werner Müller has put it, "Historians cannot discount memory, but they cannot count on it either." Instead, the historian's task is what the great historian of the Irish Famine, Cormac Grada, defined as being "above all to establish what happened in the past as best we can, no matter how inconvenient that may be for people in the present."

But Grada rightly distinguishes the past in general from what he calls "the past that is not yet history." And in my view, it is in that past that Ukraine currently resides. It could hardly be otherwise. To quote Yaroslav Hrytsak again, "the mythical worldview, [which is] inherent in every person...manifests itself especially powerfully in times of crisis and upheaval." So, if I insist upon this point, it is in no way a criticism of Ukraine. And it is surely worth underscoring the fact that before the Russian invasion in 2014, exercises of the kind of critical history that Grada and Hrytsak's work exemplify were common in Ukraine. It is not you Ukrainians who insisted on giving the mystical world view pride of place, it was Vladimir Putin with his adamant denials of your history and even of your existence as a people. That you have responded with your own countermyths – not all of which, to be clear, are historically false, even if many are wildly romanticized, such as the folk utopia of Cossack Ukraine as being a fundamentally egalitarian

polity, innocent either of social or of ethnic oppression – seems to me, however inaccurate, a humanly necessary response, one that, in any case, is really more about hopes for Ukraine's future than measured historical conclusions about Ukraine's past that are intended to be academically authoritative.

The good news, it seems to me, is that such hopes regarding postwar Ukraine are anything but utopian. To the contrary, there is every reason to suppose that Ukraine's future will be one in which there will be greater consensus than there has been historically about Ukraine's past, just as, despite what Russian propagandists say and their useful idiots in the West repeat *ad nauseam* (and I mean that literally as well as figuratively!), the Ukrainian response to Russia's attempt to extinguish it has been largely liberal nationalist, and thus inclusive, rather than ethnic nationalist and exclusivist in the sense that, historically much of Ukrainian nationalism has been. This was anything but inevitable. Indeed, as recently as during the Revolution of Dignity in 2014, it was anything but clear that this would be the case. On the one hand, it was young, educated people – people who had never known anything but an independent Ukraine – who led the charge in the Maidan. Their Ukrainian nationalism was fierce, but it was also inclusive, cosmopolitan. But it was the Right Sector, that is, the ethno-nationalists, who did the fighting. It is important to be clear eyed about this: had it not been for the Right Sector, it is anything but certain that the revolution would have prevailed. But as you in this audience know far better than I ever will,

the thirty-three years of an independent Ukraine have been a whirlwind of competing visions of Ukraine among Ukrainians. Would this have changed in the definitive, and, barring catastrophe, now irrevocable way that it now has, had it not been for the full-scale invasion? I think it would have, but I am anything but certain that when I assert this I am not speaking largely from my hopes. History, after all, is about contingency, not certainty. Would one have predicted Yanukovich's victory at the time of Yushchenko's election, and all the backsliding toward 'Sovietism' Yanukovich represented? It seems to me the answer to that is an obvious no. By the same token, was the Revolution of Dignity destined to be a success? Obviously not. To the contrary, in retrospect its triumph seems almost miraculous.

I am well aware that many Ukrainian patriots resist the argument that Ukraine has always been good at national revolution but bad at national consolidation, but surely there is at least some truth to it. And if you are united today, that is at least in part because, even as you fight heroically for your own survival, the debates that convulsed Ukraine between independence in 1991 and the full scale invasion of 2022 have to be put aside for the moment. a trivial example: the first time I was in Kharkiv — it was the summer of 2022 — I ran into some LGBT activists who very generously took me on a tour of "their" Kharkiv. At some point, I asked about the Right Sector. "Oh," said one of my hosts, "before the 'full scale' they used to attack us, harass us, throw rocks through the windows of the bars we hang out in." "And

now," I asked? "Oh, now we do fundraisers together for the army." But after a pause I asked the obvious question: "what do you think will happen after the war?" To which I got the truthful two-word answer: "Who knows?"

And none of us do know. The truce that those Kharkiv LGBT activists described between themselves and the Right Sector is a microcosm of the way in which all Ukrainian patriots, across the political spectrum, have put aside their differences for the duration of the war. Whether those differences will reemerge after the war, at least in the acute form in which they existed before February 24th of 2022, is over is not only not for me, as an outsider, to venture an opinion on; it is something that I don't think you Ukrainians can know at this point. Of course, there are a few things that one can predict with high confidence will occur, the most obvious being that the soldiers risking their lives so that this country may live will not accept a return to the morally corrosive and economically and socially destructive corruption that disfigured too much of 'business as usual' pre-2022 Ukraine. Nor does it seem to me possible that the great linguistic shift among young Ukrainians away from Russian – a shift that was immensely controversial, and, indeed, was widely rejected in many parts of eastern and southern Ukraine before the full-scale invasion – will be reversed. This is an enormous change, and one whose cost should never be underestimated since it involves not just changing the language in which you conduct your public business, but reaches into such deeply intimate things as literally changing the language

of your erotic life, or the language in which you dream. And yet I have the sense speaking to young people in formerly Russophone Ukraine – in Kharkiv, Odesa, or Kherson – that for them there is no returning to Russian. To take the particular case of my own trade – writing – the example of Andrey Kurkov comes to mind. Now in my opinion, Kurkov is a great writer – I do not use the term lightly, I assure you; he is also a great Ukrainian patriot. He has every right to continue to write his novels in Russian. But by the same token, it is impossible for me to imagine a writer in his or her twenties – Ukraine's next Kurkov, if you will – wanting to express themselves in Russian as Kurkov has chosen to do.

What the synthesis about the Ukrainian past that will eventually evolve is another matter. Can the conservative civic nationalism of a Lypynskyi be reconciled with the populist ethnic nationalism of a Dontsov? If the past is any precedent, the thought seems preposterous. And yet, where ideas are concerned, as Nietzsche rightly said, "There are no facts, only interpretations." And if you look at the transformation of Azov over the course of the past decade, you can make the case that, having started out fully in Dontsov's camp, their political and social evolution – self-transformation may be a better word for it – has drawn them closer and closer to Lypynskyi's, and now they seem to be flirting with liberalism as well, much to the consternation, so I am told, of the remaining Right Sector hardiners among them. I do not mean to minimize the ideological disputes among Ukrainian patriots. The national myth of any

country is always a work in progress, and changes – sometimes out of all recognition – over the course of time. Some debates that seem absolutely crucial in one era seem less and less compelling as time goes on. The debate over whether Mazepa was a hero or a traitor is an example of this. It is quite simply inconceivable that for as long as there is a Ukraine that monuments to the victims of the Holodomor, or to the creators of great cultural flourishing of art and literature in Kharkiv during the 1920s and 1930s, those members of what in this country you so eloquently call ‘The Exterminated Renaissance’ because almost all of them were murdered by Red Power, or to the tens of thousands of Ukrainians murdered by the NKVD during the 1930s who were buried in unmarked mass graves in the Bykivnia Forest, would ever be seen other than as places of mourning and pride. But individual heroes? Their longevity is nowhere near so assured. I mentioned at the beginning of my talk that one of the four just wars that I believe have been fought in my lifetime was Bangladesh's fight for independence in 1971. And yet those of you interested in world politics will know that the recent democratic revolution in Bangladesh that unseated the tyrannical Hasina regime led to the dismantling of many of the heroes of that country's War of Independence.

I am not saying this will happen in Ukraine. But it is likely that when, to again make use of Cormac Ó Grada's valuable distinction between pasts that are truly past, and can be considered dispassionately by historians, and pasts that are not yet history, that is to say, when

Ukraine's past can be safely considered without doing damage to its present and to its future, it will almost certainly be the fate of the major patriotic figures from Ukraine's past — all of whom at this moment in your history you entirely understandably have no wish to reexamine — to be reexamined through the critical lens of the scholar and the moral philosopher. The decision will be yours, and only yours, to make. But you know very well that at least some of your heroes, figures who mobilize and inspire you, have a very different effect on many non-Ukrainians who support your cause. The two most obvious examples of this in Ukraine today are Khmelnytskyi and Bandera. For most of you, both men are heroes, and understandably so. How could you not see Khmelnytskyi's fight to secure and religious independence for the Hetmanate from Polish rule as anything less than inspiring. And how can any Ukrainian patriot wholly condemn the OUN and UPA's resistance against Soviet rule? And yet you all also know, both for Jews and Poles, Khmelnytskyi and Bandera are anything but heroic figures, and the fact both men remain heroes in Ukraine is not easy to accept, even if out of solidarity with your struggle against Russia, they do not emphasize their differences with you, as, in my view, from a moral and political perspective well they should.

In the case of the divergence between Ukrainian and Polish collective historical memories of certain tragic and sanguinary events, much though in fairness not all of ever again being badly affected by events that took place in the 1940s, let alone in the 17th century

(agricultural tariffs, I'm afraid, are another and, from a forward-looking perspective, a more intractable matter entirely). Indeed, the reconciliation between Poland and Ukraine, is movingly expressed in the Lychakiv Cemetery in Lviv, the site of some of the fiercest fighting during the Ukrainian-Polish War of 1918–1919, as that blood-soaked place has now become a shared space of mourning for both. With the Jewish world, things are more fraught (I use this comparatively neutral word, but I would be lying to you if I did not tell you that, from a Jewish perspective, other stronger ones would be more than justifiable). The issue of Bandera's antisemitism is clearly not of crucial importance in Ukraine in 2024 – and speaking for myself, I do not think this the right time for it to be – but the Jewish world can hardly be expected to view the issue so forensically. And it is simply a fact that Khmelnytskyi's pogroms were the largest mass murder of Jews to occur in Europe between the Children's Crusade at the beginning of the 13th century and the Nazi Holocaust. But even with regard to Ukrainian-Jewish relations, the past's hold is steadily losing its fearsome grip on the collective imagination of the Jewish world regarding Ukraine. The fact that you have a half-Jewish president is, to any sane person, a far more significant datum than whatever crimes the UPA did or did not commit against the Jewish people, let alone Khmelnytskyi's depredations, however historically undeniable. Indeed, things have changed so much that when the Russians started justifying their war against you as one against Nazis and Banderites, some Ukrainian Jews responded by calling themselves Judeo/

Banderites and posting memes online of the black and red Azov flag with a Star of David planted in the middle of it.

My own view, for what it's worth, is that it is far too early for such considerations to be put before the general public, though it is to Ukraine's great credit that critical history of the kind that does risk making people very uncomfortable indeed is very much alive and well at institutions like NaUKMA and the Catholic University of Ukraine in Lviv. In 2010, *The Chronicles of Nathan of Hanover*, which are the most important contemporaneous Jewish account of Khmelnytskyi's pogroms, were translated and published here in Ukraine. And at UCU, Professor Oleksandr Zaitsev has written eloquently on the subject of "Demythologizing Bandera". Nor am I critical of what I tend to think of as the cultural martial law currently in force with regard to the Russian language and to Russian culture. I do not propose to discuss the legal demotion of Russian now enshrined in Ukrainian law, except to say that however the rights and wrongs of the language law were at the time of its passage — and I do not have to tell you how controversial they were, and how unwelcome in some parts of Ukraine — Vladimir Putin's denial that Ukraine exists except as part of the Russian world, that is to say, his decision to wage war not just against your bodies but against your language and culture, would seem to ratify the decisions that your government took. Were Putin waging a war against your bodies, even an exterminatory one, it might be possible to say that wanting to stamp out one's enemies' resistance is as old as war itself. But what is happening here has not

happened in many wars: the denial on the part of Russia that you Ukrainians are whom you say and what you feel yourselves to be. It is a war against your language, against your culture, against your imagination. Even the Ancient Hebrews did not say as they went about slaughtering the Amelkites that the Amelkites were actually deranged members of the Hebrew World. And yet this is exactly what the Russians say about you.

If I am right, and the war Russia is waging on Ukraine is both against the bodies of Ukrainians and against their identities, then Ukraine's fundamentally defensive culture war against Russia needs to be understood. The battlefield is always about fighting for your existential survival; and in this war, culture is a battlefield. Some people in the West who strongly support Ukraine would not agree. "Cancel Putin, not Pushkin," says a kitchen magnet now on sale in the gift shop of the Metropolitan Opera in New York. And this sounds reasonable, especially for those of us — and here I very much include myself — who believe that classic Russian literature is just as great as its proponents have always claimed it to be. To say nothing is lost by no longer reading Pushkin, or Dostoyevsky, or Tolstoy, to me is pure wishful thinking. Nor does it seem to me that you can somehow separate two of the greatest writers in the Russian language — Hohol and Chekhov — as many Ukrainians today have tried to do, and make them into purely Ukrainian writers. The reason for this should be obvious: separating them from their peers is impossible because of their shared use of the Russian language, but, far more importantly, that these were

Russian Imperial writers (to be clear, I am speaking here of the culture to which they belonged, not to their politics or to what nationality they identified themselves as belong). *Dead Souls* is the great dystopic novel of that Empire, while Chekhov is the great chronicler of its private anguish. Had Ukraine been purely a colony – its relation to Russia like Ireland's to Britain – such a separatist literary vision might be defensible. But as many Ukrainian historians have pointed out, Ukraine was Ireland, but it was also Scotland, which is to say, that like the Scots, Ukrainians played an outsized role at various periods in the administration both of Imperial Russia and of the (post-Stalin) Soviet Union.

Having said all this, I would still defend this cultural martial law that sees booksellers refuse systematically to stock Russian books, for Ukrainian friends of mine to get rid of their collections of Pushkin, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, and Turgenev, and for the names of Russian writers, artists, and composers, removed from Ukrainian streets. There I say this in part because what only became obvious to me when I came to Ukraine was that if there were statues of Pushkin in virtually every Ukrainian city, this was not, as so many foreigners – again, I very much include myself – so naively imagined, which was that great literature was respected in Russia as it never was in the West, but as an assertion of Russian superiority, just as – or at least so my friends in Ukraine tell me – speaking Russian rather than Ukrainian in Kyiv as recently as fifteen years ago was an assertion of superiority, while speaking Ukrainian was something to be ashamed of. Again, I still think that to

give up Dostoevsky, or to see Hohol or Chekhov only as Ukrainian writers is to lose a great deal. But I also think that, on balance you are correct in doing so, much as I might wish it otherwise. Then one looks at the uses to which the Russian Empire put Pushkin and what seems like commendable cultural piety turns out to be much more complicated.

The reason for this is simple: there is a moral ecology of cultural life as well as a hierarchy of quality, and right now that moral ecology deserves to come first. And in any case, there is no categorical cultural, let alone moral imperative for cultivated Ukrainians at this moment in their history to feel they must read Russian literature, anymore than it was for cultivated Jews for a quarter century after World War II to listen to Hitler's favorite composer, Wagner, even though by any objective measure few composers in Western musical history have been greater. Vladimir Putin weaponized Russian culture; it was his choice, not you Ukrainians. So cultural piety be damned: you have every right, and some of you may well feel you have a duty, to reject the Russian culture now deployed to destroy your own culture, just as surely as an Iskander is meant to destroy a tower block or a glide bomb the flesh of soldiers. There is also a positive side to all this in the sense that the corollary in Ukraine to this banishing of Russian culture has been the rediscovery and long overdue injection in the bloodstream of your cultural life of the works of literature in the Ukrainian language that was suppressed for so long during both Imperial Russian and during Soviet times. You are fighting a war for your

existential survival and yet, perhaps for the first time in your history, your culture and your language can *breathe*. This is already a great triumph, it seems to me.

I have gone on too long. My crystal ball broke long ago, but let me conclude by saying a few words about the future. You Ukrainians want victory and justice, and in a better world, you would get both. But if this war has proven anything it is that the world is just what Hegel said it was: a slaughterhouse. I pray you achieve victory, and I believe that victory is attainable. But I do not believe that getting justice in the sense of seeing Putin, Shoigu, Gerasimov, and the rest taken to the Hague and judged by the International Criminal Court is ever likely to happen, unless, as happened in the former Yugoslavia, there would be regime change in Russia that would usher in a state that would repudiate Putin's crimes. Unfortunately, I do not think Russia will change for the better, which means that their chances of Russian leaders being held to account are very slim indeed. But then again, let me suggest that all is not lost by any means and that a Ukrainian answer to Stalin's famous remark about how in the Soviet way of war quantity was its own form of quality is that your victory will be its own form of justice.

I thank NaUKMA for the great honor it bestows on me today, and I thank all you for your attention.

Slava Ukraini!

Науково-популярне видання

David Rieff

**The Moral Ambiguities
of Historical Memory:
Some Cultural Reflections
on the Ukrainian Past, Present,
and Possible Futures**

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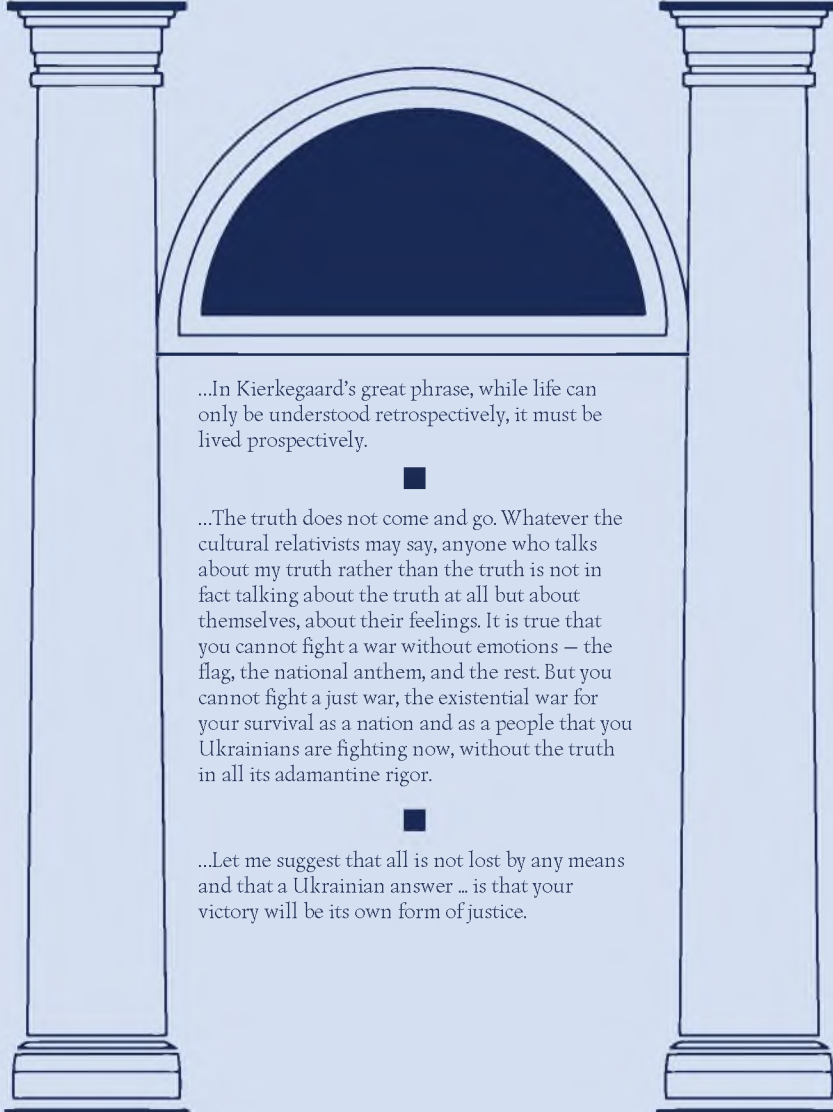
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...In Kierkegaard's great phrase, while life can only be understood retrospectively, it must be lived prospectively.



...The truth does not come and go. Whatever the cultural relativists may say, anyone who talks about my truth rather than the truth is not in fact talking about the truth at all but about themselves, about their feelings. It is true that you cannot fight a war without emotions – the flag, the national anthem, and the rest. But you cannot fight a just war, the existential war for your survival as a nation and as a people that you Ukrainians are fighting now, without the truth in all its adamantine rigor.



...Let me suggest that all is not lost by any means and that a Ukrainian answer ... is that your victory will be its own form of justice.