

# INTRODUCTION

TIMOTHY SNYDER

**T**HE YEAR 1989, the year the Polish war reporter Paweł Pieniążek was born, was understood by some in the West as an end to history. After the peaceful revolutions in Eastern Europe, what alternative was there to liberal democracy? The rule of law had won the day. European integration would help the weaker states reform and support the sovereignty of all.

But was the West coming to the East or the East to the West? By 2014, a quarter century after the revolutions of 1989, Russia proposed a coherent alternative:

faked elections, institutionalized oligarchy, national populism, and European disintegration. When Ukrainians that year made a revolution in the name of Europe, Russian media proclaimed the “decadence” of the European Union (EU), and Russian forces invaded Ukraine in the name of a “Eurasian” alternative.

When Pieniążek arrived in Kiev in November 2013 as a young man of twenty-four, he was observing the latest, and perhaps the last, attempt to mobilize the idea of “Europe” in order to reform a state. Ukrainians had been led to expect that their government would sign an association agreement with the European Union. Frustrated by endemic corruption, many Ukrainians saw the accord as an instrument to strengthen the rule of law. Moscow, meanwhile, was demanding that Ukraine not sign the agreement with the EU but instead become a part of its new “Eurasian” trade zone of authoritarian regimes.

At the last moment, Russian president Vladimir Putin dissuaded the Ukrainian

president Viktor Yanukovych from signing the EU association agreement. The Russian media exulted. Ukrainian students, who had the most to lose from endless corruption, gathered on November 21 on Kiev’s central square, the Maidan, to demand that the agreement with the EU be signed. Pieniążek arrived a few days later. After police beat the students on the night of November 30, the young men and women were joined by hundreds of thousands of others, people who would brave the cold, and worse, for the next three months.

The “Euromaidan,” as the protests were called at first, was multicultural and anti-oligarchical. Ukrainians were taking risks for a local goal that is hard to understand beyond the post-Soviet setting: Europeanization as a means to undo corruption and oligarchy. By enriching a small clique, writes Pieniążek in this collection of his reportage from Ukraine, “Yanukovych brought the state to the brink of actual collapse.” In December 2013 Russian leaders made financial aid to Yanukovych’s govern-

ment contingent upon clearing the streets of protesters. The government's subsequent escalation of repression—first the suspension of the rights to assembly and free expression in January 2014 and then the mass shooting of protesters in February—turned the popular movement into a revolution. On February 22, Yanukovich fled to Russia. (Two years later his political strategist, Paul Manafort, would resurface in the United States, playing the same role for Donald Trump.) After the failure of its policy of repression by remote control, Russia invaded Ukraine's Crimean peninsula. By March Russians who had taken part in that campaign were arriving in the industrial Donbas region of southeastern Ukraine, Yanukovich's onetime power base, to help organize a separatist movement.

Inhabitants of southeastern Ukraine had just as much reason to be dissatisfied with corruption as anyone else, and it was reasonable to fear that the revolution in Kiev was nothing more than a swing of the pendulum from some oligarchs to others.

Just how these sentiments might have been resolved through negotiations or elections we will never know, since the Russian intervention precluded both, bringing instead fear and bloodshed that changed everyone's political calculations. Slovyansk, a small city in the Donbas, was an early gathering point for separatists. When Pieniżek arrived there in April 2014, he found the place crawling with armored personnel carriers, and he understood that local opposition to the revolution in Kiev was supported by outside forces. The Russian citizen Igor Girkin, a veteran of the Crimean invasion and the commander of the separatist forces, had made Slovyansk his headquarters.

Under Girkin's supervision a "people's mayor" arrested the elected one, and the new authorities murdered two people who opposed them. When the Ukrainian government sent policemen to investigate the crime, they were arrested by the separatists and photographed in humiliating positions—images suggesting the local dissolution of Ukrainian state power. As Pieniżek

reported, power now resided in the former headquarters of the Ukrainian state police, which Russian soldiers and officers used as their base. By March 2014 Crimea had been annexed by Russia, and in April further Russian annexations of Ukrainian territory seemed possible. Putin spoke that month of a “New Russia” (*Novorossiya*), meaning Donetsk and five other regions of eastern and southern Ukraine.

Putin maintained that the use of the Russian language beyond Russia’s borders justified Russian invasion. If the unity of language groups were accepted as a principle of rule, then international state borders would cease to matter. The Second World War began from such arguments (think of the *Anschluss* and the end of Austria, the Sudetenland and the destruction of Czechoslovakia, and Danzig as a pretext for war against Poland). Thus the founders of European integration insisted that state borders be respected and issues of human rights be resolved within their necessarily imperfect confines. Pieniążek was con-

tinually struck by the fact that separatists characterized the European order as “fascist,” even as they spoke of the significance of common language and common blood. What they meant, he realized, was simply that “everyone who does not support Russia is a fascist.”

Ukraine is a bilingual country with a cosmopolitan ruling class. Because almost all Ukrainians speak Russian as well as Ukrainian, they belong to what Putin calls “the Russian world” (*russkii mir*). Yet this “world” is by no means automatically aligned with the politics of Moscow. Kharkiv, a university town near the Russian border, is governed by people who take a sympathetic view of Russia but have rejected separatism. Dnipropetrovsk, the onetime Soviet “rocket city,” became the gathering point of Russian-speaking Ukrainian volunteers who fought against separatists and Russians. Cosmopolitan Odessa excelled in mockery of Putin.

The city of Donetsk fell to the separatists for local reasons. In spring 2014 its local oli-

garchs were indecisive and tried, disastrously, to play Kiev and Moscow against each other. This had little to do with ethnicity; the most important Donetsk oligarch, Rinat Akhmetov, is a Volga Tatar. With local power uncertain Russian veterans of the Crimean campaign could travel to Donetsk at a time when Ukrainian central authorities hindered such people from reaching other east Ukrainian cities such as Kharkiv. Afterward Russian troops could move into Donetsk across a border that Ukrainian authorities were unable to control. Some of the Russian regular soldiers were Siberians, and many of the irregulars were Chechens. Thus people who did not speak Russian were killing people who did—in order to defend the Russian language in a place where it was never threatened.

Despite the annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and separatist control of the city of Donetsk in April, by May Russia was facing humiliating defeat. Throughout the country the Russian intervention had, as Pieniążek notes, “strengthened the sense of

Ukrainian identity.” The Crimean model of Russian control was irrelevant in almost all of Ukraine and was failing in the southeast. In Crimea Russia had a network of local turncoats, considerable support from local Russians, and military bases from which to launch an invasion. Without such resources the limited detachments of Russian special forces, known in Ukraine for their lack of insignia as “little green men,” could not control the southeast. Four of the six southeastern districts that Putin called “New Russia” had produced no separatist movement. The separatist hold on the Donetsk and Luhansk regions was partial and shaky.

The Ukrainian leadership now decided to fight. Although the Ukrainian armed forces were small, they quickly drove back the separatists. Ukraine used air power to deploy troops and destroy some of the armor the separatists had seized from Ukrainian forces or obtained from Russia. In May 2014 Kiev was abuzz with rumors of a Ukrainian offensive on Donetsk. To stop

the rout Moscow had to bring down the Ukrainian air force. In June Russian troops crossed the border with tanks and anti-aircraft batteries. About a dozen Ukrainian aircraft were quickly shot down.

The Russian decision to escalate brought about a major war crime. One of the numerous Russian military convoys in those weeks departed from its base in Kursk on June 23. It was a detachment of the Russian Fifty-Third Air Defense Brigade, bound for Donetsk with a BUK anti-aircraft missile launcher bearing the marking 332. On the morning of July 17, this BUK launcher was hauled from Donetsk to the Ukrainian town of Snizhne and then brought under its own power to a farmstead south of that town.

But for what happened next, this transport of a Russian weapon would have simply been one of several photographed by locals and ignored by the world. Malaysian Airlines Flight 17, carrying 298 passengers from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur, was flying just then over southeastern Ukraine.

At 13:20 it was struck by hundreds of high-energy projectiles released by the explosion of a 9N314M warhead carried by a missile fired from that BUK launcher. The projectiles ripped through the cockpit and instantly killed the cockpit crew, from whose body parts some of the metal was later extracted. The aircraft was blown to pieces at its cruising altitude of thirty-three thousand feet, its passengers and their baggage scattered over a radius of thirty miles.

Pieniżek raced to the site where the largest pieces of wreckage and a number of corpses were found. Although he was the first reporter on the scene, one day after the crash, its story had already been told on Russian television. Two Russian networks claimed that Ukrainian aircraft had shot down the plane. Three other networks provided a motive: Ukrainian authorities had intended to shoot down an aircraft carrying Putin and had made a mistake. Long before the 298 corpses had been assembled and identified, the victims had been defined in

the Russian media: the Russian president and his people.

In the days that followed, Russian media purveyed further versions of the disaster: fictional, contradictory, and sometimes grotesque. What Russians call the “zombie” story, that the CIA filled the plane with corpses and exploded it by remote control, enjoys surprising longevity. The Russian tactics are easier to mock than dismiss. A large majority of Russians (86 percent in 2014, 85 percent in 2015) blame Ukraine for shooting down the flight; only 2 percent blamed their own country, with most of the remainder opting for the United States.

How did Russia reach a point, in its media and politics, where the fact of Russian soldiers mistakenly shooting down a civilian airliner during a Russian invasion of a foreign country could be transformed into a durable sense of Russian victimhood? For that matter, how did Russians take so easily to the idea that Ukraine, seen as a fraternal nation, had suddenly become an enemy governed by “fascists”? How do Russians

take pride in a Russian invasion while at the same time denying that one is taking place? Consider the dark joke now making the rounds in Russia. Wife to husband: “Our son was killed in action in Ukraine.” Husband to wife: “We never had a son.”

Russia, unlike Ukraine, has natural gas and oil, a strong army, and a propaganda apparatus that can be used to delay, distract, and confuse. The Russian leadership failed to use the profits from energy exports to diversify the economy during the flush first decade of the twenty-first century when prices were high. We should see the policies of institutional oligarchy, military buildup, and media coordination as internal and misguided Russian choices that made foreign wars likely. Russian propaganda themes of ethnic justice and antifascism are more appealing than the basics of political economy. Propaganda conceits of this kind allow Russians to define themselves as the victims.

Russia, like Ukraine, has failed in the modern task of establishing the rule of law.

Many Russians, for that matter, reacted to this failure in much the same way as Ukrainians did in 2013. Russians protested the falsified parliamentary elections of late 2011; Putin claimed that members of opposition groups had responded to a signal from Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and Russian police arrested their leaders. Although the Russian media followed Putin's line in 2011, the very fact of the protests seem to show that media control and coordination were not enough. The emerging stratagem was to merge Russian news with foreign news: to make it seem as if much that happened abroad was about Russia, since foreign leaders had nothing on their minds but the disruption of Russian politics. In this way Russia's growing social and economic problems could be ignored even as Russians believed they were at the center of world attention.

After the protests Putin turned away from the middle class and embraced national populism. The rejection of the EU as "decadent" and the creation of the Eurasian

alternative also arose from this experience. So when Ukrainians protested in favor of the EU in late November 2013, Russian leaders understood this within the story line they were writing for themselves. Rather than dwelling on the similarities between Ukrainian and Russian problems and the uncomfortable ability of Ukrainians to demand reform, the Russian media defined the Euromaidan as an eruption of European decadence.

The European Union was already called "Gayropa"; now the Euromaidan was called "Gayeuromaidan." Once Russian troops invaded Crimea, happy endings gave way on television screens to splendid little wars. Russia's economic decline continued, but this could now be presented as the price of foreign glory. The new Russian wars are a Bonapartism without a Napoleon, temporarily resolving domestic tensions in doomed foreign adventures but lacking a vision for the world. Authoritarianism is the best of all possible systems—the thinking goes—because the others are, despite



appearances, no better. Lying in the service of the status quo is perfectly justified, since the other side's lies are more pernicious.

All problems, in this worldview, arise from illusory hopes of improvement aroused by foreign powers. Police power is authentic, whereas popular movements are not. Killing in the service of the status quo is necessary, since nothing is more dangerous than change. In the parts of southeastern Ukraine under Russian and separatist control, millions of people have lost their homes and thousands have lost their lives, but the property of the oligarchs is untouched—and those separatists who believed they were fighting against oligarchy have been murdered.

Must protests for justice bring foreign invasion, stupefying propaganda, and squalid murder in the name of maintaining the wealth of a few? This is the essence of Russian foreign policy: enforcing the principle that public efforts to change politics for the better must bring war and “normalization”—to use the term made notorious after

the Red Army and its Warsaw Pact allies put down the Prague Spring in 1968.

After the invasion of Czechoslovakia, Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev promised “fraternal assistance” to any Eastern European country that seemed to depart from the official line. To Soviet citizens Brezhnev proposed “really existing socialism,” the notion that despite the dreariness of life nothing better was possible. For KGB men educated in the 1970s such as Vladimir Putin, instability and change were the enemies more than any particular idea. Working in the 1980s in East Germany, he could delude himself that the status quo was durable—though by then East German stability depended upon Western economies. It would not occur to him that Brezhnev's bet on energy exports and foreign intervention was a mistake; once in power Putin would repeat it. Eastern European dissidents drew a different lesson from the wreckage of 1968: the importance of truth as the foundation of a life in “dignity”—a term that Ukrainians applied to their revolution in 2014. Why

did so few people who identify with the left not see the Ukrainian revolution as such and not condemn the counterrevolutionary Russian invasion accordingly? Part of the answer is that many in the West who remember 1968 recall Paris and not Prague, and so they forget the reactionary militarism of the Brezhnev doctrine.

There was no Orwell of the Ukrainian revolution, but readers of Paweł Pieniążek will get something like the everyday grit and political insight of *Homage to Catalonia*. Pieniążek risked his life to see what he saw, as did other brave and talented Western journalists. Along the way, perhaps, he benefited from the seemingly innocuous nature of his work. Because separatists believed that only television coverage mattered, they kept asking where his cameraman was. Perhaps because he was filing for print Pieniążek found it easier to extend conversations and move from one side of the lines to the other. After he spent days with a separatist, the two men realized they had both been on the Maidan on the same

day, the one beating and the other getting beaten. It says something about Pieniążek's tact that he kept the relationship going. Pieniążek takes no stands and strikes no poses but modestly exemplifies the old dissident ideal of seeking after small truths, at risk to oneself, in a world of big lies.