LATEST THOUGHT

Russia, Ukraine and the Battle of Yesterday

A historical epic with an unwritten end

By **Greg Blake Miller**

IN LATE FEBRUARY, when tires were burning at the barricades on Kiev's Independence Square and the future of Ukraine was already as difficult to grasp as the rising smoke, a culturally inclined New Yorker could have caught a cab to the Metropolitan Opera and taken in the latest rendition of Alexander Borodin's *Prince Igor*. The opera, completed in 1888 during the heyday of Slavic romanticism, transforms Russia's great national epic, the 12th-century *Tale of Igor's Campaign*, into soaring song: "Glory to our princes!" the people cry. "Glory to them all! Glory to Rus!"

"Rus," if you're keeping score at home, is the name of the culturally advanced medieval society that arose on the banks of the Dniepr River in the ninth and 10th centuries. This Brigadoon of Slavic history, with its gleaming capital in Kiev, flourished into the 13th century. It left us architectural treasures such as the St. Sophia Cathedral and literary ones such as Igor's tale, which recounts a doomed military expedition in 1185. At its height, Rus touched the shores of both the Baltic and Black seas. But the heirs of Genghis Khan invaded in 1223, with a devastating sequel in 1240, and Kievan Rus crumbled.

Kiev's St. Sophia Cathedral.

THE GREAT DIVIDE

In the always-joyous field of national-identity politics, this is where the real trouble starts. Suffice to say that, for any studious contemporary Russian schoolchild, it's the no-brainiest of no-brainers that the cultural riches of Kiev traveled north to Vladimir, then to Moscow, while Kiev itself and its environs became a hollowed-out plaything for Mongols and Turks and Lithuanians and Poles—a kind of shape-sorter for a whole mishmash of identities, none of which could claim the glorious patrimony of Kievan Rus. To a similarly studious Ukrainian child, however, these were the centuries when the Kievan inheritance was forged into a new culture on the Dniepr.

In 1654, the vast territory with Kiev at its core, a land now known as Ukraine—itself a relative term meaning "on the edge"—was absorbed into the Russian empire. It was a crowning irony: The absorption took place after Ukraine's great national hero, Bogdan Khmelnitsky, had turned to Russia in an effort to beat back the Poles and create an independent Ukrainian state.

Poles and Russians and Turks and Germans would keep fighting over Ukraine for centuries: A substantial part of what is now western Ukraine was taken from Poland after the Hitler-Stalin pact of 1939—this in part accounts for the deep divisions in Ukraine today, with a pro-European Union west and an east with a strong Russian cultural orientation. In 1954, Ukraine got a bonus gift—which has turned out to be a Trojan horse indeed—when Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, on the occasion of the 300th anniversary of Khmelnitsky's bargain, handed it the Crimean peninsula, which had never been part of Ukraine and was already home to a Russian majority.

LIVING HISTORY

In 1991, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Khmelnitsky's dream at last came true, and Ukraine became an independent state. There followed a flowering of the Ukrainian language, which the tsars had tried to stamp out and the communists had continued to marginalize.

This long-awaited moment also brought intensive study of Josef Stalin's murderous collectivization campaign and the resulting famine that killed, by various estimates, 4 million to 7 million Ukrainians. It was a time for the shedding of light and the exorcising of ghosts. Alas, some ghosts were simply revived: As in many post-Soviet nations, race-baiting right-wing ideologues emerged; in this case, they idealized Stepan Bandera, the World War II-era nationalist revolutionary who—determining that if Stalin was his enemy then Hitler must be his friend—collaborated with the invading Nazis. The Bandera legacy became one of post-Soviet Ukraine's hottest political minefields.

Liberal and nationalist Ukrainians could, however, agree on one thing: Their land, as much as Russia, was a rightful heir to Rus. The heritage of Igor and of St. Vladimir, who in 988 brought Christianity to Rus, was not alien to modern Kiev; it was, literally, *at home* there, a deep foundation for an independent state.

For many Russians, though, the possibility that "little brother" Ukraine could ever fully leave the Russian cultural-political orbit—that it could, like that red balloon in the opening ceremonies of the Sochi Olympics, simply, sadly float away—is at best a melancholy notion and at worst a thing to be avoided at all costs. When Vladimir Putin said in 2005 that the breakup of the Soviet Union was "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century," he was not lamenting the loss of Uzbekistan.

Greg Blake Miller is a former staff writer for The Moscow Times.
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ASK A NATIVE

JAMES P. REZA

When are we finally going to address our water-supply problem?

Welcome to Las Vegas! You must be new here to not know that we are (and have been) addressing this concern for decades. If you look closely, you'll notice the pricey tiered-usage rates that financially punish so-called water wasters, the assigned watering groups that determine the day(s) of the week you can irrigate your landscape and the "water police"—water district employees who cruise around looking for violators and investigating reports of waste called in by (ahem) neighbors.

Other policies intended to boost water conservation in Southern Nevada include recommending low-flow showerheads (2.5 gallons per minute) and landscaping (no big lawns!) permitted in new developments, while offering financial incentives to residents who replace existing lawns with water-friendly landscaping. Additionally, Las Vegas has for decades been very good at community-scale wastewater reclamation, treating effluent and runoff from Las Vegas Wash and releasing it back into Lake Mead.

All of this has come about by necessity. Southern Nevada's water allocation from the Colorado River and Lake Mead was fixed by the Colorado River Compact in 1922; meanwhile, our population has increased by a factor of 400. And while Las Vegas could have helped by stemming the population tide in the 1990s (there was the infamous "ring around the city" proposal intended to foster density and limit growth), that would have been antithetical to our city's free-market approach.

Still, we must be making progress; according to a recent report produced by the Fronteras news organization and aired on KNPR, Las Vegas is the most successful water-conservation and reclamation city in the United States. That's a good thing. What isn't is that during that same Fronteras report, one of the experts interviewed suggested that there is no need for lawn restrictions in places like Ohio, because, obviously, they have too much water.

As Carl Sagan's *Cosmos* suggests, that is a small-minded approach to a whole Earth problem. As any hydrologist will tell you, there is a fixed amount of water on our planet that gets recycled throughout the global ecosystem. When Las Vegas was founded in 1905, Earth's human population was less than 2 billion. Between 2020 and 2030, it is expected to breach 8 billion. By 2050? Ten billion. If severe need manifests severe action, as it has in Southern Nevada, the rest of the world needs to get on board, and fast. Ironic that a libertarian city is a global leader in conservation, isn't it?

Questions? AskaNative@VegasSeven.com.