

Ukraine Diaries  
Andrei Kurkov

"Ukraine Diaries" captures the confusion, suspicions and elation as Ukraine broke free of Yanukovich only to confront Putin

is a novelist living in Kiev with his English wife and three teenage children. He is also a diarist – he has made a habit of practicing his craft by capturing his impressions of each day's events.

His diary entries between November 21, 2013 and April 24, 2014 ring true as just what they are – a diary. It is entirely in the present tense. It has not been redacted to look prescient, nor has the author gone to much trouble to ensure that a reader who is not familiar with Kiev, Ukraine and the politics of the area knows what is going on where. For those of us who live here, it is amazingly real and immediate.

The Maidan uprising and subsequent Russian invasion have been awash in propaganda, mostly from Russia though the West does its part. This diary serves as a database of observations by a (very alert and well connected) common man of events as they happened. He assumes that the readership of his diary shares the common knowledge of people in Kiev. He does not go out of his way to make the case that:

- President Yanukovich was Putin's choice for President of Ukraine, and Russia was deeply involved in installing and manipulating him.
- Therefore, the Russian FSB (national security service), successor to the KGB, played a large role in Ukrainian politics. Under Yanukovich Ukraine's FSB did likewise, though their service of Ukraine's real interests after Yanukovich left has impressed this reviewer.
- Putin is aggressively working to reestablish Russia's empire. Kurkov assumes that his reader knows that this has been evident through his wars in Georgia and Moldova, and his constant bullying of Ukraine Belarus, Kazakhstan and the Baltic states. He uses natural gas prices, promises of loans and trade restrictions to constantly jerk them around.
- The Moscow Patriarchy of the Orthodox Church is subordinate to Putin. Peter the Great brought the church under his control three centuries ago.

The evidence of the diary will convince the reader that these suppositions are correct. Kurkov makes a number of wry comments about the transparency of the lies offered by Yanukovich and Putin, and about Yanukovich's stupidity. This diary quote could have come from anyone in Kiev: " This country has never had such a stupid president before, capable of radicalising one of the most tolerant populations in the world!"

There are some important terms that Kurkov does not explain. For example:

- The titushki are paid troublemakers that Yanukovich bused in from the countryside to cow the more civilized urbanites of Kiev. They are thugs: members of local fight clubs. He reports that

they would be promised 400 hryvnya (then, about \$50) to raise havoc. One of Yanukovich's many mistakes was to constantly stiff these thugs, paying them less than the agreed amount.

- The Berkut were the highly trained riot police. They used tactics going back to the Roman "turtle" and improved during the US antiwar riots of the 60s and 70s. They generally moved in a phalanx, protected by large shields. They were armed with truncheons and rubber bullets. Disciplined as they were, they would probably not have used live ammunition without authority.
- The byudzhetniki (the root word is budget) are low-level civil servants, encouraged/coerced to turn out in support of the government.

Wikipedia will be useful to the reader in looking up others.

The diary describes where events took place. Even for somebody living in Ukraine, it will be convenient to keep Google Earth open in another window in reading the book. Important places are:

- Lazarevka is where Kurkov has his dacha, his country house. There are tens of places by that name. This has to be the tiny village 40 miles west of Kiev.
- The places he describes in Crimea are along the southernmost coastline, a beautiful and rugged stretch reminiscent of the Amalfi Drive, France's Corniche, or California's Big Sur.
- Downtown Kiev is quite small. It is a five-minute walk from Kurkov's apartment to Maidan, another five to the houses of parliament, and just another five to the presidential mansion. All of the action took place within 1/2 mile of the main drag, Khreshetik, which itself is about a-mile long.

The diary assumes that the reader is familiar with events. He does not describe the shootings on Maidan or the invasion of Crimea, assuming that the reader knows what is going on. It will be useful to have a chronology of events at hand.

This book ties in neatly with other books on Russia and the war. *Letters from Russia* clearly describes the tsar's power, his instruments for projecting that power, and the country's foreign policy objectives. They have not changed in 175 years. Archie Brown's *The Rise and Fall of Communism* describes how it worked in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Timothy Snyder's *Bloodlands* describes how Russia and Germany made Ukraine the bloodiest place on earth for a decade and a half. John Keegan's *A History of Warfare* starts with a description of the Cossacks – the same Cossacks that Putin has revived to serve as his palace guard and terrorists in Ukraine. Lastly, *Putin's Wars: The Rise of Russia's New Imperialism* describes the extensive planning that went into the wars in Chechnya, Georgia, Crimea and now Ukraine. Nothing is by accident.

This book, available in Kindle format from Amazon for \$9.99, is a quick read. Given the frequency with which a citizen of Kiev is called upon to refute Russia's lies, it will be a useful resource. While Russian propaganda is more shrill and widespread, the truth hangs together much better. This book contains many nuggets of truth and useful insights.