

Alexander Motyl FINAL

VC: Hello, I'm Vanessa Corwin

KK: And I'm Kathleen Kaan

VC: The world is watching Putin's war in Ukraine. How much longer can Ukraine hold out, even with substantial aid from NATO allies? With us today is Alexander Motyl, Professor of political science at Rutgers University in Newark, NJ. He is a specialist on Ukraine, and Russia and the former USSR. He has authored many books and he contributes to journals, op-ed pages, and magazines. And by night, he is a poet and painter. A true renaissance man! Welcome to the podcast.

AM: Thank you so much Vanessa, thank you so much Kathleen.

VC: So, let's start with putting this conflict in some kind of context. The cultural and political relationships between Russia and Ukraine are complicated. Many Ukrainians, particularly in the East, are Russian speaking and have families and close ties in Russia. So, could you please explain these complexities for us?

AM: It's far more complicated question than it seems at first glance because if you look at the historical trajectories of Russia on the one hand and Ukraine on the other, you see that they go off in different directions and they continue in different directions throughout most of history and at various times they also intersect. But for the last, roughly, 200 or so years, Ukraine and Ukrainians have been part of the Russian empire. That was the case roughly in the 18th century, middle of the 18th century. There was the collapse of Imperial Russia in 1917 and then the Soviet Union, which was essentially the Russian empire and then 1991 the whole place falls apart. So, because of Ukraine's status as a, well frankly, as a colony, that would be the best way to look at it, a colony within the Russian empire there was a lot of intermixing on the level of culture, on the level of politics, economics, obviously personal intermixing as well. But the important point to keep in mind is that it wasn't horizontal. It was dominant and subordinate where the Ukrainians were the subordinates and the Russians were the dominants. So, the result of that is that you have a perception on the part of the Ukrainians starting in the 19th century, that the only way that the Ukrainian culture and language and nation can survive and thrive is if it breaks out of this dominant/subordinate relationship, which is another way of saying if it becomes independent. So, the Ukrainians, along with scores of other national movements in the 19th century started demanding autonomy and independence from the Russian empire. That came to a head in World War I and the revolution. Ukraine was independent for about two, three, four years depending on how you count it. Then everything fell apart. The Russians took it over, and basically have remained in charge of Ukraine until 1991 when the Soviet Union fell apart. And then the last 30 years were a period when

Russia and Ukraine seemed to be developing as independent states that would be able to find some kind of modus vivendi. But of course, as you know, Putin changed all that. His decision to invade has completely severed this relationship. Ukrainians almost to a person have become deeply, profoundly, irrevocably anti-Russian.

KK: I believe the rest of the world never thought of Ukrainians as heroes, but they certainly do now. How is the situation in Ukraine different from when Russia invaded Crimea in 2014? It seems as if they just walked in with little resistance.

AM: One difference is of course a difference in size. Then, Russia invaded Crimea plus parts of the Donbas in the East. This time the invasion took place along the entire southern, northern and eastern borders. Then, as you said, quite rightly, Russia pretty much walked in. This time it met very fierce resistance. Now, after over 100 days of fighting, it's on the verge of losing the war. And that points to a very significant difference within Ukraine. In 2014 Ukraine had just experienced three months of a fairly chaotic, very energizing but nonetheless fairly chaotic revolution which led to the deposition of the then-president, Victor Yanukovich. So, Ukraine, while on the one hand everybody was exhilarated and feeling terribly patriotic and victorious at the same time the country's institutions were pretty much chaotic. It wasn't clear who was responsible for what. The opposition might have won but it wasn't quite yet in charge. At the same time the Ukrainian army, thanks to Mr. Yanukovich, consisted of about 6-7,000 battle hardened, battle-ready troops. Today the situation is completely different. For one thing, you have an effective government. And in contrast to Mr. Yanukovich, who wasn't much of a president, Ukraine now has a very charismatic, very effective president by the name of Volodymir Zelensky who has been able to respond to this Russian aggression by taking matters in his hands, publicizing the Ukrainian cause in the international arena and mobilizing the people around himself.

VC: Why do you think there was so little resistance in Crimea?

AM: The reason for there being so little resistance was that most of Crimea had already been in Russian hands. Crimea, since 1994 had the status of an autonomous republic so it was pretty much self-ruling. The Ukrainian military's presence in Crimea was minimal. Sevastopol figured as the base for the Russian Black Sea fleet. So, the Russians already had something like 20 to 30,000 troops in Crimea. They didn't have to invade. They were there. So, it wasn't an invasion per se, it was just a takeover. And at the same time, Kyiv is chaotic, people aren't quite sure what's going on in the country, and Putin was literally able to walk in, as you said,

literally walk in and take over, and everybody suddenly awakens and realized oh my God, this is what's happened.

KK: Now I see the Russian ships are docked in Crimea loading wheat. Is it Russia's intent to starve the Ukrainians as in the Stalin time?

AM: As to the question of starvation, what's going on in Ukraine since February 24th is actually a conscious policy of genocide on the part of the Russian regime. So, there have been reports of thousands of atrocities, war crimes, rapes, pillaging, looting, and of course the virtually unlimited bombardment of cities which are being destroyed, they're being leveled to the ground with no concern whatsoever for the civilian population. What Putin essentially wants is to destroy Ukraine as a state and as a nation. He wants the territory. In my own thinking, I've made the comparison of Hitler and Putin. Both were essentially maniacal, aggressive, imperialist leaders, both were fascists, both tried to build up empires and both had their scapegoats.

VC: So back before the hostilities actually started, initially the US warned Ukraine about these impending attacks and at least publicly they didn't act as if this could really happen. Was that a strategy on the part of Zelensky?

AM: I think Zelensky along with most of his people were simply of the opinion that a full-scale war was just impossible. To be honest, I was of that opinion as well. I expected some kind of incursion in the Donbas, in the East. Minor, localized, possibly bloody but localized and minor. And the opinion among most Ukrainians was similar to mine. And basically, the argument that all of us were making and I think Zelensky subscribed to this was that, as I used to say, you have to be crazy to start a war because it would unleash sanctions, it would be the end of the North Stream 2 pipeline, it would lead to heavy resistance by Ukrainians, possibly produce a quagmire, thousands of body bags would be flying back to Russia, Putin could lose power, the regime could change, the world would isolate Russia. And people basically argued, including me, that given all of those negatives, you'd have to be crazy to invade. But Putin did. And of course, everything people foresaw is happening, and I personally believe Zelensky was of that opinion as well.

KK: We're still hearing on the news, what some of the news has said, that the Russian soldiers don't even know why they're fighting, that's why they're weak. They're beginning to protest in Russia. Am I correct?

AM: Initially that was the case. The first few POW's that the Ukrainians captured, we weren't told why we're here, we were just based, we were told that these were exercises, and that may be true, right? It may be true, or it may also be a line that they're spinning so as to get off the hook for having invaded a country. It's hard to say. My guess is that it's true for some, not true for others. But what is true, and there's a whole

bunch of evidence to this effect is that there is a significant degree of demoralization within the Russian armed forces. Some of them have also been shocked by the higher living standards in Ukraine. Remember Ukraine is one of the poorest countries in Europe so that just says something about the level of living standards in Russia. That was a shock to them. And many of them started questioning, “what are we doing here? Why are we here? Whom are we liberating, with what particular end in mind?” And the enthusiasm for being sent to the front and possibly being killed as a form of cannon fodder isn’t exactly appealing to many Russian men.

VC: Is it also true that the Russian military is quite badly organized? Their command chain is faulty, they don’t have enough noncommissioned officers in the field and they’re kind of clumsy in their strategy. Do you agree with this assessment and do you think this is part of the reason why the Ukrainian resistance has been so successful?

AM: Clearly that’s part of the equation. The Ukrainians have turned out to be far better than anybody suspected. But at the same time the Russians were supposed to have had the second-best army in the world. It turned out to be 100th place, or thereabouts. Partly it’s poor planning. They thought that they could just go in in two days. There were reports of soldiers who had enough food for two days and then started starving and eating cat food, dog food and things like that. So clearly there was a lack of preparedness. But at the same time, they didn’t plan for logistics they didn’t plan for fuel, supplies. They simply attached—this was in the early stages of the war, they simply sent their armored vehicles, especially the tanks along these roads. The fields were impassable. The Ukrainians were simply picking them off, one at a time. And they’re now concentrating all their efforts in seizing parts of the Donbas in the east. And their strategy there, again, they shell some part of a territory which they need to occupy without any regard for civilian lives, for infrastructure, for buildings, I mean they just destroy, I mean the losses in the past few weeks on the Russian side have been very high. But the Russian attitude toward their own human soldiers is that technology, heavy weapons, matter more than the individual soldiers. Soldiers are expendable. Tanks are not. Planes are not. So, they send them in one at a time. You also mentioned a very important problem with the Russian armed forces, namely the lack of a middle range officer class. So, they’ve got people at the very bottom and they’ve got the generals which means that the lines of communication are fuzzy and the result of that is, is that the generals need to go down to the actual front lines in order to oversee what’s being done, what isn’t being done. In the Ukrainian army they’ve got NCOs, they’ve got the lieutenants and the sergeants which they’ve modeled on the US and other NATO countries. But the Russians are sticking to their old traditions. And that accounts for the fact that something like 10 to 12 Russian generals have been killed in action. This is astounding, that’s obviously no way to run an army.

KK: Recently, a 20-year veteran diplomat wrote a scathing letter, I think his name is Boris Bondarev and he's resigned. What do you think will happen to him? I mean he wants to stay in Geneva, but God knows what Putin will do.

AM: Well, you know, Putin has ordered the assassinations of over 20 political opponents in the last 20 years so if I were this diplomat, I would hightail it for some safe house in Virginia if I could and I'd stay there until the war is somehow settled or Putin disappears. I'd certainly be fearful for my life. There have been some individuals in Russia who protested the war, the more highly placed celebrities, they've been criticized, threatened, but so far, they've been untouched; a number of them have been arrested. But someone like this fellow who actually represents Russia in the international arena qualifies as a traitor and you know what Stalin used to do to traitors—well, not just Stalin, the Soviets used to do to traitors—they'd hire assassins and make sure that their lives would be limited. So, I'd certainly be worried. But the question you ask is very good because there is good evidence—again, this isn't just pie in the sky theorizing, by people like me, there is actually good evidence by Russians and by non-Russians that suggests very, very strongly that there are strong divisions within the Russian elite, that there is increasing dissatisfaction with Putin and his war. Basically, hawks versus doves. A number of generals have been fired. Apparently, some officials, a significant portion of the security services have been fired as well. So, Putin is cracking down for obvious reasons. I mean he doesn't want to be blamed for catastrophes. He's looking for scapegoats. But at the same time that's increasing dissatisfaction within the political as well as the economic, the oligarchs and others, they're all losing money. So, there is a lot of discontent. But whether that discontent will manifest itself in the form of some kind of coup or putsch, no one knows, right?

VC: The US is now considering sending special operations forces to help guard the US embassy in Kiyv. The embassy is now protected by state department security people and normally as you know the US Marines guard the embassies, but due to the current situation in Ukraine this might not be the best solution. In your view, what repercussions do you see going forward if they decide to do this, to send the special forces. Would this be escalating the conflict?

AM: Well, the Russians could easily interpret it that way, although technically they wouldn't be because as long as they stay in Kiyv then they're not on the front lines, they're not involved in the battles and so on. So, it would be a bit of a hard sell. The Russians are obviously going to say "Ah, the Americans are controlling the Ukrainians, the Ukrainians are puppets of Washington." But that's just old stuff. What this is, however, is a very strong signal to the Russians. It's basically a signal that we are committed, right, I mean seriously committed to help the Ukraine. And it's also a signal to the Russians, "keep your hands off Kiyv." Because if you do try to capture the city then you're going to be dealing with American special ops guys.

KK: Do you believe we've done enough with sanctions against Russia, the United States plus the NATO allies?

AM: Well ideally, the oil imports and the gas imports, that's really the key to the Russian economy. If you really, really want to cripple the Russian economy you would put a halt to oil imports and the Europeans are on the verge of doing that. Hungary is a standout, right? I read that there may be ways they can get around the Hungarians or get the Hungarians kind of on board. That would be a big deal. The really biggest deal would be to look for alternative supplies of gas. That would just hamstring the Russian economy overnight. But that's tough because there are – the Europeans, for a variety of reasons having to do with their own domestic politics are very dependent on Russian gas.

VC: Putin has said that they have biological weapons, chemical weapons, and of course nuclear weapons and they would not be afraid to use them. Do you think this is posturing, do you think this is a bluff, or do you think they might do that?

AM: Before the war began, I would have said, oh, absolutely this is posturing, just like the posturing that they were engaging in vis a vis Ukraine, but as you know, I was wrong and I've had to come to the conclusion that this guy is somewhat unhinged and that worries me, because if it were someone like that and here again the comparison with Hitler is quite appropriate, might be tempted to use that kind of weapon. A weapon of mass destruction. Now the Russians, for what it's worth, say that they would never start an atomic war and they would never start World War III. And the problem with whatever the Russians say is that it's very hard to distinguish truth from lies. So, for months they insisted they would never, never, ever invade Ukraine, and they did. So now when they say they would never start a war, World War III or use weapons of mass destruction, how is one to interpret that as a genuine statement or is that just another instance of lying? So, it's hard to say.

KK: The President of the United States cannot just hit the button without everybody around him stopping him or agreeing. Does Putin have anybody like that or is he a one-man band?

AM: That's the good news, or at least potentially the good news. He has a suitcase, like all these guys and it has some kind of gizmo. He presses the button in the gizmo, but what that does is it sends a signal to the general staff, to the generals that Putin has decided, let's do it. Then five of the generals have to sign off on this in sequence. So, if any one of them says "nyet," then it's a no-go.

VC: Sounds like it's much like our system.

AM: Right. So, it's not just a crazy guy with a button. It's a little more complicated. And if it's true, like I think it is, that the general staff is divided, some of them are hawks, some are doves, and all of them seem to be critical of Putin then that would seem to suggest that at least one of them is unlikely to press the button.

KK: You know, we've been talking about a lot of things but I just realized we have not mentioned President Zelensky who is everybody's hero and I'd love to get your take on it. At the beginning for me, when I heard an actor, a dancer, a comic, I thought oh boy, they're in trouble. I was wrong, he's – I don't think anybody expected him to step up to the plate the way he has. What do you feel about that, Alex?

AM: Boy, you're absolutely right. When he was a candidate for the Presidency, I was extremely critical for precisely the reasons that you alluded to. I said, "Good Lord, a comedian? I mean you know, he's a nice guy, but come on!" And then he surprised me. For the first year he was okay, and then he kind of got into a rut and missed the boat on a number of things, he was increasingly criticized. So, his second year in office to put it kindly, was mediocre at best. And then the war, and of course there too he didn't quite—should he have foreseen the war? Maybe yes, maybe no, but he didn't. And it came as a surprise, virtually no one thought based on his record, based on who he was, good Lord, a comedian? And Instead, within a few days, almost immediately he took control, he stood down Putin, he asserted himself, he said, "I'm not leaving, I'm staying here." He mobilized the people, he gave them an example of courage and frankly, who would have think it? But then again clearly, he had that within him.

VC: Yeah, he really stepped up. He's like the world's hero now.

KK: Don't forget, he's a great dancer. He was on Dancing with the Stars.

AM: So, he's been able to connect on all sorts of levels with the world public. And in contrast, Putin looks like a hooligan (VC Yeah) And that's putting it very kindly.

VC: Well, he was a hooligan. He was a KGB guy. Absolutely. Absolutely. I don't have real Netflix but I understand that they're running the first season of Zelensky's comedy show.

AM: Right, A Servant of the People. It's remarkable because that show, or rather, his career really mirrors that program. (VC: Yeah, that's right) because in the program he's elected president, he comes in gangbusters, start organizing stuff and he gets into doldrums, he gets criticized and towards the end he comes out with guns blazing and wins the day.

VC: Art imitating life, life imitating art. So, going on to another recent incident, there is a 21-year-old Russian tank commander who pleaded guilty to killing a Ukrainian man but he said he was following orders

and then he was convicted of premeditated murder, sentenced to life in prison. So, what's your take on this, do you believe he was following orders, do believe it came from on high?

AM: First of all, we don't know. On the one hand, I can easily imagine that the officer said, "hey guys, why don't you just do whatever you like and have some fun" because there have been so many cases of rape, looting, killing, that it's hard to imagine that this could be taking place without the knowledge of the officers. And of course, this guy, he's using the standard response, right? It's essentially the Eichmann response, saying hey, don't blame me. Blame the guys who were giving the orders. I was just a small cog in this enormous machine. And there are actually videos of Russian soldiers just going bang, bang, bang, shooting a family.

KK: Well, even when they put up on buildings, this is a hospital, children to show them these aren't soldiers, they don't care.

AM: That's right.

VC: That's right, they have no concern for people, for citizens.

AM: Zero concern.

VC: None whatsoever. Now do you think, even in 2014, we had social media, we had 24-hour news channels but I think their impact is really heightened and so now, in this day and age, we've got war all the time, we've got 24-7 on cable news, we've got it all over social media. Do you think this has any impact on how the war is going?

AM: Well, it's, yes, absolutely. On the one hand, it's sort of a morale booster for the Ukrainians. There's no question about that. I've heard that from friends. They don't feel alone. They don't feel as isolated. It gives the soldiers and especially the civilians the sense that the world cares. So that clearly matters. At the same time, as you know, because so many people in so many countries are so outraged by this blatant aggression, there's been an outpouring of support, financial support. That's also had an impact on celebrities, some of whom have contributed a million dollars or more. Most recently I read that Liev Schreiber gave a significant amount of money. He's of Ukrainian background. So that adds up, right? And for a country that needs money for the war effort, these little bits and piece add up and before you know it, you're talking about significant amounts of aid. And clearly to a large degree that's a result of this 24-7 social media, right? I mean we're just inundated with information about the war and the photographs, photographs of the atrocities. And people are outraged, rightly so.

KK: Because it's 24-7 and because this is what our world is, how can we assume that the Russians don't see this? The Russian people. It has to seep through. Can they be so isolated that none of that seep through and they don't see what actually is going on?

AM: Well, remember that part of the problem is that the good number, several hundred thousand Russians, young, professional, tech-savvy Russians have left since February. And these would be the people who are most attuned to social media and so on. Then you've got another 15,000 who appear to have been arrested for publicly protesting in some fashion or other. And, again these are the people who would be on our side, but they're in jail. Then you look at the remaining population, especially those living in Moscow and Petersburg. They do get some information on the Internet, but the Russians are blocking the Internet sites so you really need to know how to navigate these sites or need to know how to do it more or less well. And most of them get their information from television, and Russian television is simply – I'm speechless. They have gotten to use talk show hosts that sound like Joseph Goebbels. They are demagogues, they are racists, they're anti-Semites. These are just awful, awful people who have been spewing this kind of propaganda for the last 20 years, and you know, at some point it begins to seep in.

VC: So, Alex, how is this conflict, how is this war affecting you personally? Do you have loved ones in Ukraine? Have you traveled to Ukraine since the hostilities began?

AM: Well, no, I haven't traveled, I haven't been there for a number of years, for two years because of Covid and now because of this. Usually I'd spend a month, maybe two over the summer in Ukraine and I have a whole bunch of friends and colleagues mostly in Kiyv but also in a bunch of other cities. And then I have, gosh, 20, 30, 40 relatives depending on how you count them, but mostly in Western Ukraine.

VC: And how are they doing?

AM: They're OK. I'm in touch with one cousin especially and we communicate on virtually a daily basis, and he's optimistic, he's hanging in there. He tells me about the rest of the family, they're OK. One or two of them have left for Poland but mostly they're there. In terms of my friends and colleagues, most of them are also in Ukraine and from what I can see from the things they write to me they seem in pretty good spirits. The general mood in the country is that the Ukrainians are going to win. Me personally, for me, when the war broke out on February 24th, I was in shell shock for about three days partly because I thought it would never happen. And then once it happened, I was like, oh, my God, I never in my life imagined I would be experiencing a war, up close. So, I was in shell shock for three days until this cousin of mine wrote to me and said, "Hey, I think we're winning!" And I thought, "Son of a gun, he may be right! (Laughter) And at that point I swung over to this kind of cautious optimism.

KK: Well, I think we all have hope for Ukraine. And I think that personally, I think Putin's on his way out. I think it's the fall of Putin. I think this is not gonna last and it's just the beginning of the end for him.

AM: I think you're absolutely right. The only question is when (KK Yeah) and how many people have to die in the meantime (VC: Right, right). The writing is on the wall for him for sure.

VC: What about the refugees, the huge numbers of refugees that we're seeing. Is the international community doing enough? I think a lot of folks have really stepped up in that area.

AM: The refugees have gotten a very warm welcome. There's something like ten million people who had to leave their homes. Roughly ten. Around six have simply been displaced within the Ukraine. So, they moved from East and South to West. And they're being taken care of. I haven't read of any major complaints. So that means another four or so million have left the country. Of that number about three and a half, three, three and a half, are in Poland, and Poland has been simply phenomenal. The Poles deserve a Nobel prize for what they've done. When you cross the border from Ukraine into Poland by train there are these stands with water, with sandwiches, with soup, with toys for the kids, dog food and things like that. It's really quite remarkable. And then another half a million, maybe to a million, they've been dispersed in a bunch of European countries, Canadians have taking some in, we're taking some in, but the treatment has been very good.

VC: So, what's the best way for people, especially here in the US, who want to help out—are there particular organizations or charities?

AM: Well, there's a, there are a number. I would recommend looking at three in particular. One is this group run by very tech-savvy younger people. It's called Razom for Ukraine, R-A-Z-O-M. They've got excellent connections and they are totally honest. They've got a website; you can go there and click on. And they give money to a variety of causes. You can kind of specify where and they don't take overhead. Then there's an organization called The Ukrainian National Women's League of America which has been engaged in charitable activities for about 100 years. And again, very reliable, very honest. But the work they do is focused on helping children, mothers, families, things like that. And then finally the third one would be this kind of Ukrainian political-social umbrella group called The Ukrainian Congress Committee of America. They represent the community, they have been very active in raising funds for wounded soldiers, for refugees and things like that. And then, you know, there are all sorts of smaller groups which are pretty good, but those are the main three and, if you provide funds to them, you can be certain that they'll go to the actual recipients.

KK: Thank you for that information. Now, we want to know where our listeners can find you. You are an author of many diversified books (AM: Yes!) Can you give us an idea of where we can find the books?

AM: There are two simple ways. One is if you Google my name, you'll get a whole bunch of stuff. But even easier for books, they're all on Amazon and I've got something like ten novels, a poetry collection, and then a bunch of, four or five or six academic books. They're all on Amazon, you can even get used copies.

VC: So, they can just go to Amazon and put in your name...

AM: Yes, that's right. It's It's Alexander Motyl, and the last name is spelled M-O-T-Y-L, or as I say, Mary Oliver Thomas Yellow Lady. Put in the whole name because if you just put in the only the last name it'll call up as motels and things like that (laughter). So you've gotta put in the whole name.

VC: Alex, thank you so much for your time today and for shedding some light on this very complex issue.

AM: My pleasure.

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