

My Maidan

By

[Myrna Kostash](#) | June 16, 2014

It was the high point of perestroika and glasnost in the USSR, and I was in Toronto at a meeting of the editorial collective of *This Magazine*. My fellow editors were all seasoned activists -- feminists, artists, unionists, academics -- and I had a story I wanted to pitch.

I had been reading the Soviet Ukrainian press, I told them, and I wanted to write about what I was learning from that source about the status of women. For example, I had learned that women workers on a collective farm (dairymaids) earned far less than men workers (truck drivers, tractor operators), that women in provincial towns complained that you couldn't find a baby carriage in the shops, and much more in that vein.

I could sense the lack of enthusiasm around the table, even hostility. The problem was, it was explained to me, that such an exposé, even as reported by Soviet Ukrainian journalists, of the second-class status of women in the Soviet economy would feed right into the Reaganite obsession with the Evil Empire and would inevitably lead to cancellations of subscriptions to *This Mag*. I was nonplussed but I did file the story, it was duly edited and published, and subscriptions were indeed cancelled.

Fast forward to the winter of 2003-2004. For a long time it was known as the Orange Revolution, a massive peaceful demonstration of people power that went on for weeks in Independence Square in Kyiv, capital of a now-independent Ukraine. A presidential election had been blatantly rigged, civic society organized itself to demand new elections, fueled by something like hope for their own future, men and women who promised democratic governance and an end to corruption came forward as candidates amid the post-Soviet parliamentary disorder, the collapse of social programs and cultural budgets, the murder of journalists... and for the first time since the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, I felt deeply proud of my Ukrainian kith and kin.

A Ukrainian friend wrote that "joy, hope and solidarity" were in the air. But as I read more and more of the journalism pouring through the portals of the Internet, I began to notice a trend that troubled me: many of the West's and Canada's progressive writers and journalists were not in love with the Orange Revolution (as they had been with those in East Timor, Mozambique, downtown Seattle), but in fact suspected the Ukrainian version to be of sinister provenance. It seems that we supporters of civil society on the move in a historically brutalized society were dupes of a campaign financed by capitalist and imperialist interests in the U.S., who were, for instance bankrolling opposition websites! Paying for exit polls! Funneling "democracy grants" into such collaborationist enterprises as women's shelters and artist-run galleries!

A number of Canadian friends on the left forwarded me the same article (from the UK's *The Spectator*, of all places) that alleged that the pro-democracy crowd on the Square (Maidan) were "drug-addict skinheads" pumped up by "nationalist and secessionist songs dating from the anti-

Semitic period of World War II." This was simply asserted, not substantiated and circulated apparently with approval.

I waited, in vain, for someone on the Canadian left to acknowledge the Orange Revolution for what it palpably was: a social movement embraced by Ukrainians from all regions, speaking several languages, of Christian, Jewish and Moslem faith, all expressing their desire for what we "progressives" take for granted in Canada, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of conscience. Instead, *This Magazine*, for instance, ran a piece from a Canadian election monitor who had been in Ukraine, "How Canada got caught up in Ukraine's Orange Revolution and helped hijack history."

In this account of events on the Maidan, history was hijacked by police who "let" the protests happen, by media-constructed "myths" of rigged elections, by students "called" to rebel by the politicians and by that sinister consortium, "western democracy," which "always wants to get its way." (Glaringly absent from this catalogue of reprehensible intervention was the office of Russian president Vladimir Putin, the Russian media, the Russian Orthodox Church. Putin must be allowed his "sphere of influence.") If history was being hijacked by such agents, where did the writer believe it should otherwise be headed?

Meanwhile, at *rabble.ca*, a writer watching it all on CNN viewed the events on the Maidan as the networks' "latest reality television program," as if the Orange Revolution was a performance for jaded post-modernists.

What did such cynical observers wish instead for the people of Ukraine? the ongoing cronyism, the corrupted institutions, the demoralized intellectual life, the impoverished working class?

My growing bitterness and sense of betrayal at the lack of solidarity with protesting Ukrainians was also a reaction to my own internalized self-hatred as a Ukrainian-Canadian who had herself denied that such submissive, passive and beaten people as the post-Soviet Ukrainians could ever be agents of their own transformation. Now I despaired of my mean-spirited "fellow travellers" who gave such little credit to the agency of great swathes of the Ukrainian republic who stubbornly insisted that they were sick of of the sordid business-as-usual. Instead, the fellow travellers assigned agency to the all-powerful, omnipresent, irresistible American "interests," a fetishism they should have seen as politically disabling.

I revisit these experiences because I see a pattern in them that has been repeated as Canadian progressives have weighed in on the meaning of Euromaidan, winter 2013-2014. The same skepticism about the spontaneity of such courageous self-organization, the same implication of dark European- or U.S.-based conspiracies behind it, the same solicitude for Russian imperial interests, the same uncritical transmission of anti-Ukrainian propaganda, the same lack of solidarity with the desire and will of masses of people from all parts of Ukraine for a life of material, moral and spiritual dignity.

What is going on? To paraphrase Timothy Garton Ash in the Guardian: "Tell me your Maidan and I'll tell you who you are."

There are memes endlessly repeated by Moscow and circulated by its friends (the "useful idiots") who are both on the left and the ultra-right in the West (a case in point -- both [progressive writer](#)

[Murray Dobbin](#) and the Italian fascist National Social Front have expressed support for Putin's moves in Ukraine).

Thus, for example: the demands articulated from the Maidan in its early weeks instigated a coup of fascist anti-Semitic thugs abetted by the CIA against an elected president. Russia has a legitimate geopolitical concern about Ukraine's turn to Europe. Russia and Ukraine have a long, intertwined history of relationship that should not be sundered. Putin has a right to defend oppressed Russian-speakers beyond Russia's borders. Russia stood up to Hitler's armies while Ukraine collaborated with the occupiers.

Each of these assertions has been contested by observers with deeper knowledge of history and with experience in Ukraine, from historians to journalists to social activists, who are attacked and abused by cyberbullies for their efforts. Putin's vicious attacks on independent media, opposition parties, environmentalists, LGBT citizens, feminist activists go unremarked: bewilderingly, those "with" Putin are willing to believe the worst about Ukraine while abandoning critical thinking about whatever the propagandists in the Kremlin and Russian tv produce (a critique they never suspend about American propaganda).

They ascribe to right-wing nationalists in Ukraine a popularity belied by their miserable electoral standing, 1.86 per cent, a standing far below that of the ultra-right parties now in the European parliament (and just a little ahead of the Communist Party of Ukraine's 1.51 per cent). And they don't seem to notice that Moscow's "anti-fascism" as a policy vis à vis Ukraine is not the same as fighting actual fascism: the Russian Duma (parliament) and Moscow State University have hosted the leader of Hungary's fascist party, Jobbik, while RT, the Kremlin's propaganda network, has celebrated the electoral successes of France's National Front.

The much-ballyhooed "intertwined" history of (parts of) Ukraine with Russia was a history of coercive and often violent colonialism, from tsarist enslavement of the peasants to Soviet holodomor, not to mention periodic decimation of cadres of the Ukrainian Communist Party and cultural policies that criminalized the Ukrainian language and its speakers. Historians of the Second World War confirm that more Ukrainians as soldiers in the Red Army were killed fighting the Wehrmacht than American, British and French soldiers combined. In an Open Letter last May to Putin Ukrainian Jewish community leaders "strongly urge" Putin to cease attempts to "delegitimize the Ukrainian government."

This is the maligned interim government that had replaced that of President Yanukovich who, having been duly elected in 2010, proceeded to siphon off the state treasury; confronted by the fury of the Maidan, he criminalized protest, revoked guarantees of freedom of speech and assembly, and cancelled a parliamentary debate on constitutional reform to send out thousands of riot police instead, with deadly results. Even members of his own party voted to oust him from the presidency. As one commentator wrote in the Guardian, the Maidan was "an attempt by ordinary Ukrainians to take back control from the oligarchs. The left should be cheering them on."

To me the greatest tragedy to have befallen the Maidan, after the burial of the dead killed by the regime's sharpshooters and snipers, has been the loss of its initial promise in the infamous events that succeeded it (including the participation of armed "protection" by ultra-right gunmen).

Who now in the West remembers the fabulous potential of civil society in the extravagant diversity of age, ethnicity, social origin, religion, language, sexual orientation and artistic expression that gathered in its tens of thousands?

In the wake of the "turn away from Europe" represented by the resurgent ultra-right parties in western Europe, images from the Euromaidan haunt us -- and the Kremlin -- with their evocation of civic courage and communal imagination -- an Internationale for the 21st century.

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