

Plenty of reasons for Ukraine's grim future

By Marvin Zonis

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My mother's family fled Ukraine for the U.S. in 1921 when Bolshevik troops overran their town, Berdichev, extinguishing an independent Ukraine that had been declared when the czar collapsed in 1917. Those who remained did not have a bright future. The Bolshevik troops were savage in executing the wealthy and confiscating property.

In the 1930s, Josef Stalin, premier of the Soviet Union, ordered the confiscation of Ukraine's agricultural land, forcing a famine. In 1932 and 1933, between 2.4 million and 7.5 million Ukrainians perished in what the post-1990 independent Ukraine declared a "genocide."

The Nazi invasion introduced another level of pain to Ukraine. More than 1.3 million died in Nazi concentration camps spread around Ukraine. The Germans needed Ukraine's food and stopped supplying rations to its cities. German Gen. Walter Reichenau declared in 1941 that feeding locals and prisoners of war was an "unnecessary humanitarian gesture." As a result, Kiev lost 60 percent of its population while 80,000 people died of starvation in Donetsk.

A special fate awaited Ukraine's Jews. Before the Germans even thought of the Final Solution, Nazi soldiers carried out their own murders. As many Jews as possible were shot by German military squads. "The Last Jew in Vinnitsia," a town adjacent to my mother's home, is the title of a famous Nazi photograph. The Jewish population of Kiev, more than 30,000, was machine gunned in the Babi Yar ravine in the autumn of 1941. More than 200,000 Jews perished in a concentration camp outside Lviv. Some 200,000 residents of Odessa and the surrounding region were murdered in December 1941 by Romanians allied with Germany.

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Germany.

At the end of World War II, the Soviets estimated that more than 5 million Ukrainians were killed by the Nazis.

Ukraine's economy grew relatively rapidly after the war, particularly because Soviet presidents Nikita Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev came from Ukraine. (It was Khrushchev who attached Crimea to Ukraine in 1954.) Heavy industry was fostered, and even nuclear capable missiles were produced in Ukraine for the Soviet armed forces.

But the woes were to return. The collapse of the Soviet Union was a disaster for Ukraine's economy. After 1990, Ukraine's economy fell an average of 8.9 percent a year for 10 years. For the next 12 years — through 2012 — the economy grew by an average of 3.9 percent per year. But prosperity was elusive and economic growth was captured largely by a class of indigenous oligarchs with close ties to the rulers.

Corruption was rife. The country is ranked more corrupt than Russia and is tied with Iran, Nigeria and Papua New Guinea as among the most corrupt countries in the world, at 144 out of 175 rankings.

In short, Ukraine's situation was pathetic before the Russian seizure of Crimea. None of that justifies the seizure and, of course, Russian President Vladimir Putin hardly bothered to justify the seizure at all. He certainly did not suggest he would rescue Ukraine from its troubles.

Ukraine, for all its well-deserved outrage, has few options. Its military has been woefully underfunded. Its air force has been mothballed. It stands no chance in a military conflict with Russia. Nor will the U.S. or Europe challenge Russia militarily.

So Ukraine will have to suck it up, deal with the restive Russians in the east and get on with trying to build a democracy with fewer oligarchs, less corruption and more economic growth.

Don't look to any of the major players for help. Former Ukraine President Viktor Yanukovich's rival, ex-Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, who was recently released from jail, is as corrupt as the rest.

The odds are not favorable.

Marvin Zonis is professor emeritus at the University of Chicago's Booth School of Business.

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