

Peter Molin's "Strike Through the Mask!": American Veterans and the Ukrainian Crisis



Bordentown is a pleasant town located on the New Jersey side of the Delaware River about twenty miles north of Philadelphia. For a small town, Bordentown has seen a fair amount of history and notable residents. Clara Barton lived there for a while, as did Napoleon Bonaparte's brother Joseph. Most famously, Thomas Paine, the British author and friend to the American and French Revolutions, bought a home in Bordentown in 1782 and lived there on-and-off until his death in 1809. Paine is sometimes called "the father of the American Revolution" for his writing and active support of the American cause. His 1776 pamphlet *Common Sense* stated the American case against England's King George III clearly and persuasively and so helped galvanize the American will to fight for independence. Later in 1776, another Paine essay, titled

"American Crisis" contained the famous words:

These are the times that try men's souls: The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman.

I don't live far from Bordentown, and occasionally visit it in the course of daily life. So it was on a Sunday afternoon this past February that I arrived in town to find the downtown square packed with people assembled to honor the memory of Peter Reed, a Bordentown native and former Marine who had recently been killed in Ukraine aiding the resistance against the Russian invasion. I had read of Reed's death earlier in the week, but had not noted the Bordentown connection. Given my own sympathy for Ukraine and interest in the lives of veterans, it seemed a fortuitous coincidence, or even a matter of fate, that I happened upon the ceremony held in Reed's honor.

From the spoken remarks, it was clear that Reed was well-liked and admired, and also a guy cut from a different cloth. Speakers remembered Reed fondly as a good guy, but also something of a joker. One story was that he had streaked through the new local high school in the days before it opened, christening it in his way to the delight of friends who cheered him on. Another speaker told of how Reed had filled her car interior with wadded-up newspapers in a friendly show of prankster one-upmanship. Every speaker noted Reed's desire for adventure, to help, and to serve—impulses revealed in service in the Marines as a medic and culminating in stints as an NGO providing medical aid in Mosul and then in Ukraine. This impression is corroborated by a reminiscence published in the Guardian by an author who had worked with Reed in Mosul helping fight ISIS: "Pete was one of the most selfless people I've ever met. You should know a bit about the good he did in this world."

While I listened to the speakers at Peter Reed's memorial, I did not hear mention of Thomas Paine. Maybe I missed it. Maybe the speakers thought it a stretch to invoke his name in connection with Reed's sacrifice on behalf of Ukraine, or they didn't know how. For myself, I greatly admire Paine in his time as a man who combined striking writing ability, political acumen and righteousness, and courageous service in the field. As I listened to the speakers in Bordentown, I came to admire Reed in his time as a man who, like Paine, was possessed by an unwavering sympathy for people fighting against tyrannical government.

Reed, as far as I know, was not a man of the pen, as was Paine, but he was just one of a number of American military veterans who have volunteered to fight on the side of Ukraine. Early on, the most prominent of these has been James Vazquez, a former Marine whose Twitter dispatches from the frontlines described in vivid detail the action and emotional caliber of the war. No doubt Vazquez's model inspired other vets to volunteer, either through admiration or envy.

But more recently, Vazquez's claims to prior combat experience have been discredited, and doubt has been cast on the verity of his reportage from Ukraine. Unfortunately, other articles have also portrayed some American vets in Ukraine as thrill-seekers, or as not having much to offer, as seeking profit, or as having little stomach for the long fight. Several veterans and the organizations with which they are affiliated have become ensnared in legal and financial turbulence that besmirch the good names of the participants and which suggest their utility, even at best, has been marginal.

Such articles are necessary, for the complete picture is important to understand. But in our overheated political times, they also seem motivated by an instinct to discredit the Ukrainian cause and undermine support for it in America. From my vantage point as chronicler of Iraq and Afghanistan literature, art, and movies, I've been most intrigued by the

accounts of Ukraine written by veterans of the GWOT art-and-literary scene. My sense that these men (all men that I know of, so far) have much to offer in terms of insight and expertise and possess the capacity to write shrewdly and in-detail about their experiences. In short, I trust them—not that their ideas are conclusive, but that their words are sturdy start-points from which my own thoughts develop.

Three writers in particular have published long trenchant articles that weigh their observations about American vets in Ukraine in light of their own war-and-military experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan: Elliot Ackerman, Luke Mogelson, and Matt Gallagher. Another, Adrian Bonenberger, the founder of *The Wrath-Bearing Tree*, has spoken at length about support for Ukraine on a recent podcast.

Ackerman, a former Marine and now a novelist and journalist, has written frequently about Ukraine for high-profile media outlets such as *The Atlantic* and *Time*. Ackerman's articles often address policy and strategy, but my favorites have been those that describe scenes and people. Ackerman's portrait of soldiers already in the fight or moving to the fight, refracted through his own thoughts about the allure of war, are brooding and evocative, never more so than in an article published in the literary journal *Sewanee Review* titled "Four Letters from Ukraine." The passage below renders Ackerman's talent for scene-setting:

The driver nodded glumly. We piled our bags in his trunk, and he sped us through town to the hotel I'd booked on Expedia a week before. It never ceases to amaze me that you can e-book your rooms in a war zone. Wars can often feel to me like distant, far-off things, even though I have experience writing about them and fighting in them. With a war I've never seen, I usually feel this distance. The stream of headlines, the assault of images—it commodifies war, condenses it into a packageable story. When I feel that distance—whether I'm planning to head to that war or not—I'll often pull out my

phone and see what it would take to get to the front line. In nearly every instance, I discover I could arrive at the war with a place to stay within twenty-four hours. And suddenly, the war feels closer.

Later, Ackerman ruminates directly about the international volunteers he meets in Ukraine:

The effort to rally foreign fighters to Ukraine seems to suffer from an adverse selection problem. Although many are sympathetic to Ukraine's cause, a person must place their life on hold to fight. Typically, this means a person can't have much of a life to begin with. If you have a job, or a family, or myriad other adult commitments, it is likely you can't drop everything and go to Ukraine for an indeterminate amount of time. If you don't have any of these commitments, it might be for a reason, and perhaps these folks ... aren't the best raw material from which to forge an international legion.

Luke Mogelson is not a vet, but a journalist and fiction-author who often writes about war-related and veteran subjects. His short-story collection *These Heroic, Happy Dead* is one of my favorite collections of GWOT-themed fiction. Even better, his *New Yorker* account of Kurdish fighters in Mosul served as the basis for my favorite post-9/11 war film so far, *Mosul*. Last year, Mogelson traveled to Ukraine to take stock of the international fighters fighting on Ukraine's behalf. A passage from his *New Yorker* article "Trapped in the Trenches in Ukraine" describes the best and the worst of the new arrivals:

Of the hundreds of foreigners who had been at the facility when it was hit, many had returned to Poland. According to my Canadian friend, this was for the best. Although some of the men had been "legit, values-driven, warrior-mentality" veterans, others were "shit": "gun nuts," "right-wing bikers," "ex-cops who are three hundred pounds." Two people had accidentally discharged their weapons inside his tent in less

than a week. A "chaotic" lack of discipline had been exacerbated by "a fair amount of cocaine."

The [recent] attack functioned as a filter....

As the article proceeds, Mogelson describes members of the Ukrainian military International Legion in action on the front-line, to include the precarious experience of trench warfare. At the article's close, he balances the sense of purpose that animates vets to volunteer in Ukraine against the lack of purpose many veterans felt in Iraq and Afghanistan. One vet in particular impresses him:

More than any other foreign volunteer I met, Doc seemed to be genuinely motivated by a conviction that the conflict was "a clear case of right and wrong." I sometimes wondered to what extent his desire to participate in such an unambiguously just war was connected to his previous military career....

Expanding on that last sentence, Mogelson juxtaposes service in Ukraine with the tenuous displays of gratitude veterans received from Americans for fighting in the Global War on Terror:

I also suspected another appeal in Ukraine for International Legion members. During my lunch with Doc on Andriyivsky Descent, in October, I'd been unexpectedly moved when the old man in the fedora thanked him for his service. I shared Doc's discomfort with similar gestures Stateside, but something here was different. Although the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan were transformative for those who fought in them, they had no real impact on most Americans and Europeans. Everyone in Ukraine, by contrast, has been affected by the Russian invasion; everyone has sacrificed and suffered. For some foreign veterans, such a country, so thoroughly reshaped and haunted by war, must feel less alien than home.

Iraq veteran Matt Gallagher and author of the novels *Youngblood* and *Empire City* has published two long articles in

Esquire about his trips to Ukraine. The first describes a quixotic venture in the company of fellow vet-writers Adrian Bonenberger and Benjamin Busch to train rear-guard Ukrainians in basic infantry skills and tactics. Gallagher possesses the sardonic, anti-authoritarian streak of a humorist, but in this piece the instinct for comic appraisal bumps up against his desire to help and belief in a cause that was no joke whatsoever for the Ukrainians he was training:

Then that lawyer does it again, and again, and again, and then, all at once, he's capable. Because he must be. Every woman and man there said they'll defend their homes if the war comes to western Ukraine. I pray it doesn't, but they'll be ready if those pleas go unheard. During our two weeks together, they gave our group their trust, their commitment. It's a heavy thing, to pick up a gun in war. The choice, if it does come, belongs to them alone.

Gallagher's sentiments made me think of Thomas Paine's words from "American Crisis":

He who is the author of a war lets loose the whole contagion of hell and opens a vein that bleeds a nation to death.

Gallagher's second piece more directly explores the motives and behavior of American and other international veterans fighting in Ukraine. The article is buried behind a paywall, so you'll have to accept my summary of it, but the title hints at the ambiguities Gallagher discovered: "The Secret Weapons of Ukraine: A Journey Through the Strange, Semiprofessional World of Volunteers and Foreign Fighters Who, One Year Into Russia's Invasion, Are Risking Everything to Defeat the Invaders." Not everything Gallagher describes is reassuring; several volunteers are obviously opportunistic and less than well-behaved. Gallagher is a fervent believer in the Ukraine cause, so he doesn't throw the let's-just-say "colorful" volunteers under the bus. But he's a shrewd observer of the veteran-scene in America, and he doesn't miss that that some

of the same dynamics that have driven some American GWOT vets to folly have reemerged in the overseas fighting community:

Everyone's story is different. Everyone's story is a little the same. Certain traits and patterns recur as we meet more volunteers. Most are men, but not all. Many of the younger ones served [in the US military] at the tail end of the war on terror and didn't get the combat experience they'd anticipated or perhaps wanted. Some of the older ones sold their businesses and homes to sustain their work. More than a few are living off military retirement and disability checks. I stop tallying the number of divorces and separations.

Taking stock of this ambivalent portrait, Gallagher lands on the side of the glass being half-full:

One can view this as a bit sad, even pathetic. Or one can regard their coming to Ukraine as an act of courage. Here they are, in another war zone, trying to pay it forward to others, because they believe they still have something to give.

The aforementioned Adrian Bonenberger is a US Army veteran of two tours in Afghanistan and the author of a memoir and short-story collection, as well as the founder of *The Wrath-Bearing Tree*. Bonenberger's wife is Ukrainian, and he has been in-and-out of Ukraine many times over the past decade. As I write, he is back in Ukraine and serving in the Ukrainian military as an advisor. Though he has not yet written at length about his endeavors, we await the time when he does, for it surely will be interesting. In the meantime, a podcast with Paul Rieckhoff offers insight into his motivations and actions. Speaking of his work helping Ukraine prepare for a spring offensive, he states, "Helping them get ready for the offensive was probably going to be the single most useful thing I could do as a democratic citizen, a citizen of the US, a citizen of the democratic world, of the civilized world."

Later in the podcast Bonenberger explains, "The United States

invested seven years of time in me. I went to Ranger School, to Long Range Reconnaissance School. I was a platoon leader and executive officer in the 173rd Airborne Brigade. I was an [operations] officer and company commander in 10th Mountain Division. I knew what I had to offer to the Ukrainians....”

How to read Thomas Paine’s belief and support for America in light of American veterans fighting today in Ukraine? Is the connection specious? Is it meaningful? Perhaps it’s best not to make too much of it. None of the veteran-authors I’ve described above made 1/100th the impact of Paine in his time, even measured collectively, and the same might be said for the international fighters they describe. Paine’s life was not without complication and controversy, both during the American Revolution and afterwards. Today, he is as likely to be as invoked by the right as by the left as an ideological forebear to contemporary political currents. Roughly stated, conservatives view Paine as a fierce critic of overbearing state authority, contra the more popular understanding of him as an apostle of democracy.

Be all that as it may, given the force with which Paine met the demands of the 1776 moment, less savory particulars and after-events seem secondary. My own thought is that anyone who volunteers to get anywhere close to a war-zone has less regard for convention, propriety, and personal safety than most. For Ukraine to defeat Russia now requires men and women of action first, with talent important, and idealism and commitment factored into the equation in uneven doses.

Also important is the war-of-words that place events in context while guiding readers’ thoughts to the fullest appreciation of circumstances. At Peter Reed’s memorial ceremony in Bordentown, after friends and family members spoke, a representative from a local Ukrainian Church took the podium. Though not an official emissary, the man spoke with authority and gravitas. “I know the war in Ukraine is a

distant one for many Americans, but for us it is life or death. Peter Reed's death fighting for Ukrainian freedom may be difficult for you to understand, but to every Ukrainian he is a hero. Thank you for sending him to us. We know you will never forget him, and neither will we."

Later, re-reading Paine, the Ukrainian's words seemed reflected in this "American Crisis" passage:

It is not a field of a few acres of ground, but a cause, that we are defending, and whether we defeat the enemy in one battle, or by degrees, the consequences will be the same.



Works quoted in this article:

Elliot Ackerman, "Four Letters from Ukraine." *Sewanee Review*, Fall 2022.

Adrian Bonenberger, *Independent Americans with Paul Rieckhoff* podcast. Episode 220, May 2023.

Matt Gallagher, "Notes from Lviv." *Esquire*, March 2022.

Matt Gallagher, "The Secret Weapons of Ukraine." *Esquire*, February 2023.

Luke Mogelson, "Trapped in the Trenches in Ukraine." *The New Yorker*, December 2022.

Cengiz Yar, "My Friend Pete Reed was Killed as He Saved Lives in Ukraine. You Should Know the Good He Did." *The Guardian*, February 2023.

Thomas Paine's writings are easy to find on-line. I also found the following two biographies helpful in understanding his life, work, and times:

Edward G. Gray, *Tom Paine's Iron Bridge: Building a United States*. Norton, 2016.

Harlow G. Unger, *Thomas Paine and the Clarion Call for American Independence*. DeCapo, 2019.