

**LIVING THROUGH REVOLUTION: A VIEW FROM AN  
APARTMENT IN UKRAINE**

Lydia Tomkiw

A Review of *Ukraine Diaries: Dispatches from Kiev*

By Andrey Kurkov

Translated by Sam Taylor with an afterword translated by Amanda Love Darragh  
(London: Harvill Secker, 2014), 262 pages.

Andrey Kurkov's diary begins on Thursday, 21 November 2013—the day the Ukrainian government decided to suspend preparations to sign an Association Agreement with the European Union. Many Ukrainians hoped this agreement would draw Ukraine out of Russia's orbit and reorient it westward. After hearing the news, Kurkov heads to a café where he orders a coffee and then decides to add some cognac to it. He writes, "We have, once again, had our future taken away from us."<sup>1</sup>

One of Ukraine's most well-known fiction writers, Kurkov has kept diaries for decades, but it was not until the EuroMaidan Revolution, the illegal Russian annexation of Crimea, and the subsequent war in eastern Ukraine, that he decided to publish his personal reflections spanning the period from late November 2013 until late April 2014.<sup>2</sup>

Kurkov, who is ethnically Russian but has lived in Ukraine since childhood, chronicles his daily life with his wife and three children in their apartment 500 yards from the main square in the capital, the Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square). Protesters began gathering on the Maidan on 21 November 2013 and would remain camped out for months protesting against then-president Viktor Yanukovich's decision not to sign the Association Agreement along with many other grievances, particularly the amount of corruption in the government.

Kurkov writes about his daily routine, the cold weather, what he cooks for dinner, and visiting with friends and family; all interspersed with updates about political events and his own observations from walking around the Maidan and speaking with those camped out in the square. In one entry, he describes chaperoning his son's birthday party at Paintball Planet and then reflects on the Ukrainian government's information policy—a typical juxtaposition of Kurkov's daily life and thoughts. His work provides a unique window into what it is like to live through a revolution and the downfall of a president.

As events unfold and violence escalates, Kurkov chronicles his increasing anxiety. Frightening rumors circulating around him are spreading throughout the capital. He cannot focus on the fictional novel he is supposed to be writing set in

Lithuania. Instead, he describes seeing cars burning on the streets he loves. Even though he is so close to the epicenter of it all, he admits it is difficult to know what is really happening. A cousin tells Kurkov that he uses a different SIM card whenever he goes out onto the Maidan because a friend working for the government security services has advised him to do so for safety reasons.

As someone who writes in Russian but is a Ukrainian citizen, Kurkov himself encapsulates the complex national identity of Ukraine. He describes the nasty Facebook messages he receives from Russians who call him a traitor. Kurkov contends that those who support Russian president Vladimir Putin must have either fallen prey to Russian television propaganda, have no access to the Internet, or lack perspective that would otherwise come from traveling outside of Russia.

In February, Kurkov looks in the mirror and notes that he has aged—events have taken their toll on him and many around him. In late February, President Yanukovich fled Ukraine for Russia, and soon after, well-armed men without any insignia appeared en masse in Crimea.

By early March, Kurkov describes his continuing anxiety and fear that a war will soon begin: “I awoke almost every hour and immediately switched on the computer to check the headlines. This morning, I finally managed to persuade myself: the war has not started. Not yet.”<sup>3</sup> By mid-March, Russia has illegally annexed Crimea, and Kurkov writes that he will not be vacationing there next year with his family as they did this year in January, because now the area has been “sullied by Russia.”<sup>4</sup>


Political events continued to move quickly in Ukraine, but Kurkov notes how slow Europe has been to respond. He argues that Ukraine simply needs time, a period of normal life to start combating corruption and the other problems that triggered the mass protests. However, events keep moving, but this time in the eastern part of the country.

Kurkov’s diary entries end in April when the Ukrainian government has already begun its anti-terrorism operations in eastern Ukraine against pro-Russian rebels. He remarks that life in Kyiv has mainly returned to normal, and it feels like the fighting happening in the Donbas region is taking place much further away.

As a piece of personal non-fiction, Kurkov’s diary offers an excellent portrait of daily life during a revolution, but it lacks some of the deeper background needed to situate readers unfamiliar with Ukraine’s post-independence political and economic journey. While the notes provided at the end of the text are helpful, they alone are not enough.

In an afterword dated 27 June, Kurkov writes, “It will come to an end at some point. Whatever the outcome, it is already quite clear that the good old Ukraine we have lived in for twenty-three years since she gained independence will no

longer exist. What kind of Ukraine will replace this quiet, peaceful version, no one knows.”<sup>5</sup>

As events continue to unfold in Ukraine, new questions arise: What does Kurkov think about the ceasefire agreement made between the Ukrainian government and rebels on 5 September? Has Ukraine’s revolution managed to address any of the changes demanded by protesters? Kurkov’s diary feels, to this reader, like the first part of a story that is begging for a sequel. 

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Andrey Kurkov, *Ukraine Diaries: Dispatches from Kiev* (London: Harvill Secker, 2014), 5.

<sup>2</sup> The protests that began in November were soon dubbed ‘EuroMaidan’ after the European aspirations of many of the protesters.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 144.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 148.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 244.