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DIFFUSION OF NONVIOLENT CIVIL RESISTANCE AND THE UKRAINIAN  
INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENT OF THE 1980S

By

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### Abstract

Much research has been conducted about the diffusion of nonviolent civil resistance and its various mechanisms, with a majority of the attention being paid to diffusion on a global level via external pressure and normative imitation. There is little research, however, about the mechanisms that occur on a much narrower field via individual-level communications, which lead to individuals learning from surrounding ideas and adapting them to fit their situation. Using the case study of the independence movement of the late 1980s in the former Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, I provide a nuanced analysis of these communications between the former republic and its neighbors, specifically Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, all of which were going through their own independence movements at the same time. I address the importance of these individual-level communications to the movement's success and ultimately conclude that without them, the diffusion of nonviolent civil resistance into Ukraine would not have occurred and the movement would not have proven to be successful in bringing down the Soviet regime.

*Keywords:* diffusion, nonviolent civil resistance, nonviolent action, Soviet Union, Ukraine

### Introduction

Nothing exists in a vacuum. If it did, there would be no growth or progression, no adaptation to one's surroundings. Consciously or not, our decisions are continuously being shaped by our environments, constantly changing with the flow of ideas around us. This is the underlying concept of my paper, as this principle applies directly to mass political movements. Looking specifically at the case of the former Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, I pose the following question: *To what extent did factors external to the country affect the strength of the Ukrainian anti-Soviet independence movement of the late 1980s?* The movement coincided with several others of a very similar nature. First Poland, then Hungary, East Germany, Czechoslovakia and a slew of other republics fought against Soviet tyranny and won. Ukraine was one of the last dominos to fall to democratization, and its predecessors were definitely influential, but to what extent?

The Soviet Union has long been the butt of jokes about skewed historical facts and backward technology, but the realities of the former Socialist state are not to be taken lightly. For decades, the citizens of the Soviet Union lived in deteriorating conditions, quickly falling behind the rest of the world with their standard of living, access to foodstuffs, and basic human rights. They would have never known this, though, as information about the capitalistic West was heavily censored by Soviet authorities. It was not until Mikhail Gorbachev became General Secretary of the Soviet Union in 1985 that things began to change. His democratic reform policies of glasnost (openness) and perestroika (economic restructuring) unclogged communication channels to the West, opening the floodgates of dissent against Soviet tyranny and repression. Soviet citizens finally were becoming aware of the inadequacies of their governments relative to those of

the West to provide them with basic staples for survival. The result was the widespread sweep of nonviolent resistance movements across Eastern Europe, from Czechoslovakia to the Baltics, through a process called diffusion.

Diffusion is the process of disseminating information about an innovation from one point to another through various communication channels (Rogers, 1983). Through a series of diverse mechanisms, diffusion promotes and facilitates the adoption of an innovation within a network. In our case, this network is the former Soviet Socialist Republic of Ukraine and the innovation is nonviolent civil resistance, nonviolence being an umbrella term for all tactics that do not involve violence. Gene Sharp's 1973 book, *Politics of Nonviolent Action*, provides the tools for creating a nonviolent civil resistance movement by outlining 198 methods of nonviolent action. Through the process of diffusion, Ukrainian opposition groups adopted many of them: formal organization; noncooperation through hunger strikes, general strikes, physical intervention, student strikes, processions and boycotts; symbolic public acts via displays of flags and wearing of symbols; communications with a wider audience through leaflets, newspapers and displayed communications.

With this information, I can narrow down my question slightly. *What influence, if any, did the diffusion of nonviolent civil resistance through individual-level communications have on the outcome of Ukraine's anti-Soviet independence movement?* Some of Sharp's nonviolent action tactics were instinctively applied in Ukraine because many dissidents were former political prisoners who had used them during their activism in the 1960s. However, dissidents did not have experience with all of these tactics, so most of them were applied to Ukraine as a result of diffusion from surrounding

nonviolent civil resistance movements through individual-level channels. Typically, these channels involve a “face-to-face exchange between two or more individuals”, but for our purposes, they involve any form of direct communication between individuals. These individual-level communications are the most effective in convincing individuals to adopt a certain innovation as they typically occur between people with similar cultures and attitudes (Rogers, 1983).

Ukrainian dissidents learned about the effectiveness of nonviolent tactics in movements in Poland and the Baltics through these channels. Their views were heavily shaped by their environment, their relationships with their neighbors informing each step forward. Diffusion through these individual-level communications allowed the Ukrainian movement to move beyond the limits of what they already knew and adapt to the times to successfully bring down the Communist regime.

This study on the effects of diffusion of nonviolent civil resistance in Ukraine is important because it can be applied to a broader discussion about the effects of external influences on mass political movements. With the argument I will disclose in the following chapters, we can begin to recognize patterns not only within the wave of nonviolence that brought down the Soviet Union, but within waves in other geographic and temporal spaces as well. For example, research on the fall of the Soviet Union gave us a better understanding of the sequence of events leading up to the Arab Spring and the political chaos that ensued.

This paper provides a nuanced analysis of the role of the diffusion of nonviolent action in bringing about the Ukrainian independence movement, and in doing so, highlights the dangers of relying on insular, domestic factors alone. First, I outline the

literature relevant to my discussion, from theoretical research on democratization and nonviolence to historical analyses of Ukraine's domestic conditions. Next, using comprehensive empirical evidence, I argue that the momentum of Ukraine's anti-Soviet independence movement would have been stunted had diffusion of relevant nonviolent tactics through individual-level communications not occurred. Finally, I conclude by placing the Ukrainian case study back into a broader societal context and opening up a discussion about the future.

### **Literature Review**

A wide breadth of research regarding democratization began to surface during the Cold War, as Western scholars joined their governments in the struggle against Soviet communism. However, only recently has democratization been studied within the context of diffusion. Daniel Brinks and Michael Coppedge assert that countries surrounded by democratic states are more likely to democratize relative to those that aren't. They introduce the concept of "superpower influence", indicating the positive relationship between existence within the US sphere of influence and high levels of democratic performance (Brinks & Coppedge, 2006). Johan Elkink discusses the communication involved in the diffusion process, pointing to the concept of broadcasting, or the promotion of democracy abroad through various communication channels, which reach out to a massive individual-level audience. (Elkink, 2011).

Nonviolent action is an implicit tenet of democracy—disputes in a democratic environment are often solved nonviolently through a series of nonviolent actions as defined by Sharp. As a result, much of the scholarship regarding the diffusion of

democracy provides a solid foundation for the diffusion of nonviolent civil resistance. The latter field is relatively young, having existed for only about 15 years, but there is no lack of significant research available. In 2005, Kurt Schock published his seminal work, *Unarmed Insurrections: People Power Movements in Nondemocracies*. In this book, Schock defines unarmed resurrection as a civilian-based “organized popular challenge to government authority that depends primarily on methods of nonviolent action rather than on armed methods.” (2005, p. xvi). He then fleshes out a very specific image of nonviolent action, addressing its nonviolent, active and noninstitutional nature as well as factors that determine its success. These factors do not include the ideology or level of repressiveness of the oppressors, making it possible for nonviolent campaigns to succeed within authoritarian states.

Outlining these factors is important as unarmed resurrections are typically characterized by pragmatic nonviolence rather than principled nonviolence, meaning people use nonviolence because they believe it will work, not because it is a manifestation of their ethics (Shock, 2005). Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan’s 2011 book *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*, addresses the effectiveness of nonviolent action further. Participation is key to any campaign’s success, and nonviolent campaigns have fewer barriers to entry than violent ones: for example, the physical barrier is low as there are numerous low impact methods of nonviolent action, such as strikes and boycotts. As a result, nonviolent campaigns tend to have high levels of participation when compared to violent ones, and more participation means a greater chance of a successful campaign.

Next, we turn our attention to literature on the diffusion of these nonviolent actions and other innovations throughout various regions. Scholars tend to define diffusion as a process of spreading an innovation that is fueled by a set of mechanisms (Elkins and Simmons, 2005; Rogers, 1983; Brinks and Coppedge, 2006). These mechanisms are extensive but none act alone. External pressure (Weyland, 2005), linkage and leverage with the innovator (Levitsky and Way, 2005), and normative imitation (Weyland, 2005; Rogers 1983) are relevant on a global level of analysis of innovation diffusion. In his 2005 paper, “Theories of Policy Diffusion Lessons from Latin American Pension Reform”, Kurt Weyland asserts that the external pressure mechanism helps account for the rapid adoption of similar innovations in countries around the world (2005). A country’s level of susceptibility to external pressure depends on how much leverage the external group holds over it. Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way discuss this leverage in the context of third wave democratization and assert that paired with high linkage, or connections, to the West and its democratic institutions, leverage is very influential in pushing an authoritarian country to democratize (2005). Brinks and Coppedge view this as a type of superpower diffusion, in that countries within the US sphere of influence were more likely to democratize (2006). Normative imitation is a more indirect approach to external pressure, as countries will attempt to seek legitimacy and appear trendy and modern in the eyes of the international community by adopting its norms and innovations (Weyland, 2005).

These diffusion mechanisms help explain how the implementation of various innovations, such as democracy and nonviolent action, can spread around the globe but they do not explain how an innovation can become prominent within a specific



geographical region. To address the geographical clustering of an innovation, it is necessary to look further, past the global, mass-level communications occurring between countries on different continents via broadcasting and external pressure, and into the individual-level communications occurring between regions of close geographic proximity. These communications involve various mass media and interpersonal channels and result in the learning from and emulation of ideas coming from one's direct surroundings.

Weyland considers this geographical clustering to be a main characteristic of diffusion, along with the adoption of one innovation by a wide variety of countries and an innovation's rapid spread. Trends and innovations in countries within close proximity are available and immediate and thus diffusion starts regionally and spreads from there (2005). This is also in line with Brinks and Coppedge's research, which finds that countries tend to converge with their immediate neighbors especially when it comes to regime type (2006).

Countries tend to observe the actions of others and emulate their successes, especially when those others belong to their reference group. Reference groups are made up of countries with similar cultural and geographic qualities and members rely on each other for information about innovations. They learn from each other and as a result, end up adopting similar practices (Elkins & Simmons, 2005). A country is especially likely to emulate a practice from its neighbor if it does not already have experience with it, with the information learned from neighbors replacing the lack of the information at home (Braithwaite, Maves Braithwaite & Kucik, 2015).

Information about these practices is communicated between countries through various communication channels. Mass media communication channels are the main tools used by countries with some level of similarity, or homophily as Rogers calls it, to spread knowledge of an innovation and they include radio, television and newspaper (Rogers, 1983). Interpersonal communication channels, on the other hand, do more than simply spread information. They help people decide whether or not to adopt an innovation (Rogers, 1983). These channels are particularly important in the context of nonviolent civil resistance. Elkins writes largely about democratization, but his claims apply here as well, as he connects these channels to geographic clustering, writing that people mostly communicate with individuals directly around them. Like Rogers, he also asserts that these individual-level communication channels are essential for getting individuals to adopt an innovation and that cross-border communication, like radio and television, is mostly just important for spreading information (2011).

Together, these theoretical articles do a good job of providing a framework for the diffusion of an innovation into a certain region. Their application to this case study addresses a different body of work: the existing literature on these topics within the context of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. Much has been written about the big picture diffusion of nonviolent civil resistance through the former Soviet Union, with the most attention paid to two distinct geographical groups: Poland, Hungary, East Germany, Czechoslovakia and Romania and then the Baltics. The movement in Ukraine fits into neither of these groups, so it is typically discussed on its own with some brief mentions of the two groups. While the literature (Blaj, 2013; Diuk & Karatnycky, 1990; Krawchenko, 1985; Nahaylo, 1999) gets very specific at times with individual level

domestic factors and the organizations and individuals involved within Ukraine, it does not address this level of analysis within the greater context of the fall of the Soviet Union. There are big picture mentions of the surrounding conflicts, but there is little information that outlines the diffusion minutia, the micro, individual-level communications that existed between Ukraine and its environment that not only spread information about nonviolence but that also ultimately led to the collapse of the Soviet Union.

This lack of research on individual-level communications prevents us from developing a comprehensive picture of the country's decisive anti-Soviet movement. The existing research only tells half the story—that of the movement's birth from courageous domestic actors. Without the rest of the story, without the details about its evolution process and its interconnectedness with the world around it, it is impossible to understand how the movement went from a small sprout to a thriving creature in just a couple of years.

In the following chapters, I attempt to fill this information gap, focusing specifically on the diffusion of nonviolent resistance into Ukraine via individual-level communication and its importance in the success of the independence movement. Specific connections between Ukraine and the outside world are drawn on all levels, painting a comprehensive picture of the diffusion that occurred between the years 1986 and 1991.

### **The Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic**

Ukraine, a large, ethnically diverse country nestled between Poland, Romania and Moldova to the West and Russia to the East, is no stranger to Soviet repression. After the

Bolshevik Revolution and the fall of the Russian Empire in 1917, the country saw a brief window of independence, existing unaware of the Soviet crises looming in the distance. This future became a reality in 1922, when Eastern Ukraine succumbed to Soviet pressure and became the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. Western Ukraine followed suit during World War Two. Throughout the next 70 years, the Ukrainian people were confronted with the brutal suppression of individual, political and national expression, leaving behind a hollow Ukrainian shell waiting for an oppositional movement to move in.

While Stalin's oppressive reign as leader of the Soviet Union affected the entirety of the Soviet republics, its terror was most largely felt in Ukraine. Stalin's efforts at collectivizing Ukrainian farmlands in the late 1920s and early 1930s left roughly seven million peasants dead from a targeted famine ("Ukraine Profile - Timeline," 2015). So many were killed that the famine has been named *Holodomor*, or "death by hunger" and has been immortalized in history as Stalin's Ukrainian genocide. 1937 saw a massive purge against artists and intellectuals, and WWII devastated the Ukrainian population. Over five million died in battle, and nearly all of the country's 1.5 million Jews were killed by Hitler's eugenics. When these casualties are combined with those of the 1918 civil war for independence, roughly half of the male and a quarter of the female populations of Ukraine died (Krawchenko, 1985, p. 171).

Stalin's famine and purges were tools used in the creation of a *Sovietskii narod*, or Soviet people. He created this uniform nation by physically eliminating any and all individuals who did not completely fall in line with the socialist, Soviet identity. After Stalin's death in 1953, the ultimate goal of creating a unified Soviet identity remained,

but his successors used more assimilatory measures. The Russian word *slianie* is employed to describe this nation-building approach, which marks a shift from the extermination of distinct, non-Russian groups to their assimilation into Russian culture (Krawchenko, 1985).

One of the major tools in the *slianie* toolbox was Russification, the deliberate, state-led assimilation of non-Russian nations into Russian culture largely through oppressive language policies. Language was seen as the main indicator of national identification and its usage was easy for Soviet leadership to control and enforce. As a result, the 1950s-70s witnessed aggressive policies aimed at eliminating the Ukrainian language in all spheres of life. The educational sphere was the most significant. According to Krawchenko (1985), “because schools are one of the most important instruments of socialisation, and because native language instruction is a major factor enhancing national consciousness, Russian authorities made a concerted effort in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s to Russify educational systems.” (p. 230) No level of education was exempt. Elementary school classes were taught in Russian, higher education entrance exams, textbooks and lectures were in Russian. Ukrainian language classes were virtually wiped out. These policies made it impossible to receive a good education if one did not speak Russian to some degree, so ethnically Ukrainian parents became less and less inclined to pass their linguistic roots to their children.

The workplace, housing markets and cultural and social realms functioned the same way. Russian-speakers were heavily favored for white-collar positions and decent housing. The Russian language conquered practically all Ukrainian television, cinema, theatre and radio. Typewriters lacked Ukrainian keyboards and post offices refused to

accept telegrams written in Ukrainian. Severe isolation occurred regarding the country's ethnically Ukrainian population. They were slowly losing their linguistic and ultimately national identity and had no political leverage to change the situation. As a result, when the political opportunity arose under Gorbachev's democratic reforms in the late 1980s, national identity became a major domestic mobilizing factor.

The 1980s also saw the explosion of a nuclear reactor at the Chernobyl site in northern Ukraine. The disaster of April 26<sup>th</sup>, 1986 resulted in widespread death and injury from radiation poisoning and it devastated the surrounding environment in Ukraine and Belarus, Ukraine's northern neighbor. However, it occurred in the early stages of glasnost, before Gorbachev had loosened his grasp on the media, so very little of this information seeped through the Soviet Union's tight media controls. Journalists attempting to cover the disaster were abused by government officials and were accused of stirring up emotions and purposefully creating panic (Oliver, 1992). As a result, towns affected by radiation were not evacuated soon enough, plans for the construction of more nuclear reactors were being drawn up, and life operated relatively normally for the people of the Soviet Union.

Over the next several months, as glasnost's reforms took hold, the truth about the extent of Chernobyl's damage began to slowly come out in the papers. The dust of Soviet control was lifting, highlighting a new and rapidly growing environmentally conscious popular movement of Ukrainian students, artists, writers and scientists alike. Unofficial activist groups like the Green World Society and the Ukrainian Culturological Club began to sprout up on the political landscape. In 1987, the latter published a collective letter in *Literaturna Ukraina*, a Soviet Ukrainian newspaper, calling on the government

to stop constructing new power plants in the country. They published a petition with roughly 6,000 signatures alongside the letter, as well.

The Chernobyl incident inspired a socially unifying environmental movement. It spurred some of the first mass demonstrations in Ukraine, some of the first pushes against press censorship. However, it was also a key driver in the creation of a more political cause and, along with the growing nationalist movement, became a pillar of the domestic foundation for the country's anti-Soviet independence movement. The incident highlighted the Soviet government's inefficiencies at handling and ultimately preventing catastrophe, at protecting its people and giving them a say in the functionality of the state. It was unmistakable evidence of a failed centralized political system, and with the implementation of Gorbachev's reforms, people were finally able to speak out against it.

Gorbachev's reforms, glasnost in particular, were slow to impact Ukraine. First, Volodymyr Shcherbystskyi, a conservative Communist with a penchant for the strictly controlled Brezhnev system, was the head of the Ukrainian Communist Party in the mid 1980s, and he was reluctant to implement liberal changes. Second, Ukraine was a key republic, essential for the survival of the Soviet Union. As a result, Gorbachev himself resisted reform in the country. With a population of over 50 million, roughly 70% of the Soviet population lived within Ukraine's borders. Its land was rich with black soil, vast mineral resources and a moderate climate, making it the "bread basket of the Soviet Union", and its considerable industrial production made it a key market contributor (Diuk & Karatnycky, 1990). Were Ukraine to become free from Soviet dominance, the Union would likely fall apart completely.

Gorbachev accurately anticipated the Soviet Union's weakness without Ukraine, but what he did not foresee was that "a weakening of authority would unleash emotions and experiences accumulated over years by the people of the Soviet republics" (Blaj, 2013, p. 166). The loosened social controls of glasnost exposed the full extent of Soviet crimes against the Ukrainian national identity. Finally, the blank spots of Ukrainian history that had been written out of now-Russian language textbooks were being filled in. Stories of horrific Stalin-era crimes were surfacing in Soviet newspapers; calls were being made to grant Ukrainian official language status; demonstrations were organized in support of the long-banned Ukrainian Catholic Church. A fully-fledged cultural and national revival was under way. Fueled by the newly released forces of glasnost and perestroika and in spite of Gorbachev's efforts to curb it through public criticism and retightening of media censorship, the Ukrainian national issue continued to grow, ultimately finding its footing in popular organization.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of glasnost in Ukraine was the release of numerous former political prisoners. These prisoners were largely dissidents active in the 1960s, during the height of Ukraine's national identity crisis. Krawchenko (1985) asserts that unrest during this period was mostly driven by the desire to preserve the Ukrainian language, which was being eliminated by Russification. These individuals were at the heart of it. Their nationalist agenda got them jailed in the '60s, but now they had returned to the scene. Glasnost allowed them to be released from their holding cells into a new world threatening to explode. All it needed was a push, and, with their experience organizing against Russian chauvinism, these former prisoners were able to provide it.



Ukraine's popular movement and struggle for independence were deeply rooted in the country's environmental and nationalist issues—the environmental issues a result of Chernobyl crisis mismanagement; the nationalist, of decades of assimilatory pressure and glasnost's potential for relaxation. The two provided a strong foundation for mobilization against oppressive Soviet leadership and a necessary jumping off point for a broader resistance movement. However, in order for the oppositions' calls for environmentally and nationally conscious leadership to transition into a general political call for Ukrainian independence, the opposition needed real, tangible tactics that were not rooted in narrow, exclusionary goals. For that, they turned to their neighbors, observing their nonviolent action against the Soviet system and applying it at home in order to transform their infant movement into a successful declaration of independence.

### **The Importance of Diffusion**

It is impossible to discuss Ukraine's struggle for independence from the Soviet Union without addressing Poland and the Baltics, two regions with simultaneous successful resistance movements. As the literature suggests, these movements spilled over into Ukraine, providing massively influential sources of inspiration for the country's opposition. However, that statement is far too broad for our purposes. Through an intricate web of direct and indirect individual-level communications between dissidents (students, workers, intellectuals, artists, former political prisoners), organizations and elites of neighboring countries, tactics of nonviolent civil resistance diffused into and throughout Ukraine, washing the Soviet republic over with a democratic wave so strong, Gorbachev and his leadership could not stand its way.

In order to hone in on these individual-level communications, it is necessary to begin the discussion on a global level and work our way down. Weyland's external pressure framework is essential here, as it accounts for the diffusion of similar reforms into numerous, varied countries. In the case of the collapse of the Soviet Union, this pressure comes from the West and is applied to encourage democratic reforms through nonviolent means. Even before the beginning of his tenure as General Secretary of the Soviet Union in 1985, Gorbachev had clear intentions of improving relations with the Western world. During a visit to Britain in 1984, he asserted that he hoped to limit and ultimately ban the arms race in an effort to improve East-West relations (Thomas, 1984). He reaffirmed these intentions while in office, at the Moscow Summit in 1988. He noted to guest President Ronald Reagan that it was necessary to eliminate the mistrust that had built up between the two states throughout the Cold War and led to such a catastrophic arms race (*Memorandum on Conversation: President's Second One-on-one Meeting with General Secretary Gorbachev*, 1988). Reagan was touched by this move, and by the end of his visit, he noted that the Soviet Union was not the "evil empire" he once believed it to be (*Anatoly S Chernyaev Diary*, 1988). Gorbachev was able to recognize that global political climates were changing and that a thaw—albeit, in his mind, a mild one—was inevitable. As a result of his desire to permit and even facilitate this thaw, the US was granted a level of influence over Soviet policy that it had never seen before. It was thus able to press Gorbachev's leadership on democratizing policies, using its superpower status as leverage.

This Western pressure seeped into Ukraine by way of official visits of leaders to the country and public statements in support of Ukrainian national and cultural issues.

For example, British Foreign Secretary Sir Geoffrey Howe paid a visit to Kiev in 1988 and while he was there, he took the opportunity to extend his support to “Ukrainian Christians”, whose church had been banned by Stalin in 1946, saying he looked forward to the day when [they] would be “enabled to practice their religion with freedom and with pride.” (Nahaylo, 1999, p. 124) Similarly, in Reagan’s visit to the Moscow Summit that same year, he conveyed to Gorbachev the US’s support for religious liberty.

The United States’ technological victories during the Cold War, its lack of important economic interests in the Soviet Union and its superpower status gave the country significant leverage over its ideological enemy (Levitsky and Way, 2005). As a result, Soviet leadership was very vulnerable to US pressure to democratize. There were, however, few linkages between the US and the Soviet Union, an imbalance Gorbachev sought to correct. He overtly attempted to establish greater economic and geopolitical linkages, and with those would come social, communication and transnational civil society linkages (Levitsky and Way, 2005). Essentially, Gorbachev’s entire democratization campaign was an effort to establish strong ties with the West, but what he didn’t realize was that increased linkage would lead to the demise of the Soviet Union. By forging those bonds, he basically opened the floodgates of not only pressure but also anti-Soviet information from and about the West.

### **Geographic Clustering Through Learning and Emulation**

The external pressure and leverage/linkage diffusion mechanisms provide a good understanding for how democracy and its nonviolent tenets began to spread into the Soviet Union. To understand how they became prominent in Ukraine and the surrounding

republics, we must address geographic clustering, the idea that innovations tend to spread amongst neighbors, as they are more easily visible, accessible and more immediate than innovations occurring halfway around the world (Weyland, 2005). The nonviolent resistance movements of 1989 began in Poland and spread outward, across borders to neighbors and others within close geographic proximity. When scholars discuss the fall of the Soviet Union, they tend to steer their attention towards clusters of revolutions. For example, the literature tends to either address the revolutions of Poland, Hungary, East Germany, Czechoslovakia and Romania, or those of the Baltics, both two distinct clusters of nonviolent resistance campaigns against Soviet leadership, neither of which Ukraine is included in.

If the Ukrainian case were to fit into a geographic cluster, it would be with Poland and the Baltics. These are the countries whose campaigns most directly influenced Ukrainian resistance. Ukrainian opposition members observed, learned from and emulated their nonviolent tactics, applying them to their own movement after viewing their nearby successes. This neighborhood effect, or spillover effect, is quite significant here, as it allowed the Ukrainian campaign to branch out from its environmental and nationalist roots into a broader movement for Ukrainian independence. It is also not an unknown concept to the nation. One of the most explicit examples of the spillover effect in Ukraine is from 1968 during the Prague Spring. In his personal diary, Petro Shelest, who was First Secretary of the Ukrainian Communist Party at the time and had a very strong relationship with Brezhnev, wrote that events in Czechoslovakia were “emboldening Ukrainian intellectuals and nationalist elements.” He even told Brezhnev that, especially in Western Ukraine, intellectuals and students were being affected by the

“anti-socialist, opportunist and anarchist elements” in Czechoslovakia. He could see anti-Soviet tensions in Czechoslovakia were spilling into Ukrainian universities, noting the distribution of “political and nationalist” leaflets and the circulation of newspapers pushed by Ukrainians in Czechoslovakia (Kramer, 1998, p. 234).

In the late 1980s, the Ukrainian republic experienced similar spillover effects, but these were more limited geographically, coming largely from campaigns in Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. Nonviolent tactics diffused across these borders and into the country, unifying the Ukrainian independence movement, which had been fractured by ethnically and socially varied regions. Eastern Ukraine is largely made up of working class Ukrainians with little connection with their Ukrainian heritage thanks to the heavy Russification policies in the region. As a result, the nationalist calls of the Western Ukrainian opposition tended to alienate the workers, forcing them to find their own outlet for dissent.

At the same time the Ukrainian campaign was gaining momentum, Solidarity, the first independent trade union in the Soviet Union, was rising in the Polish government’s ranks, just next door. This worker-based movement appealed to Ukrainian workers’ increasingly oppositional attitudes, fueled by deteriorating economic conditions and shortages of food staples in shops instead of the nuances of the Ukrainian national identity issue that gave life to Western Ukrainian opposition. The most explicit evidence of tactical emulation from Poland was the calls for the establishment of an independent trade union in the western Galician coal-mining region. It was to be called Solidarity (Nahaylo, 1999, p. 208). This call exemplifies the slow beginnings of a Ukrainian

workers movement, one that Eastern Ukrainians could easily latch on to and use as an instrument for their own independence goals.

Ukrainians also had neighbors to the North to turn to. Popular independence movements spurred on by mass political action had taken hold of the Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, and Ukrainians watched it all unfold, informing their own approach to independence. In 1988, all three countries formed popular fronts to formally organize opposition to Soviet rule. The Estonian Popular Front in Support of Restructuring, the Latvian Popular Front and Sajudis, of Lithuania, quickly grew into massive grassroots movements as they called for broad political, economic and cultural autonomy. These fronts were arguably the key to each movement's success and Ukrainians saw that. Their broad-based goals appealed to Eastern Ukrainian workers who saw their plans for economic autonomy as revolutionary. Nationalist dissidents in the West saw them as a way to expand past their exclusionary nationalist demands and reach a wider audience. The beginnings of this branching out were evident, but they needed more. For example, the Ukrainian Helsinki Union, a group that acted in defense of individual cultural rights, was beginning to make calls to non-Ukrainians. "We call on you. Ukraine is in peril and she is not only our motherland, but yours as well," they said (Nahaylo, 1999, p. 143). But speeches weren't enough. They needed to formally unify the country.

Quickly, calls from Ukrainian dissidents were made to create a popular front. An attempt was made in 1988 in Lviv with the formation of a local Democratic Front to Support Restructuring, whose aims were the "support for restructuring, raising democratic consciousness among the public, monitoring the observance of democratic

procedures and participation in elections” (Nahaylo, 1999, p. 140), but it didn’t take off. However, the following year, opposition forces struck gold with the Popular Movement of Ukraine for Reconstruction, or Rukh, as it often shortened to. While initially favoring national issues, Rukh became the embodiment of the Ukrainian struggle for democracy and reform, uniting around 280,000 people, from West and East Ukraine alike.

After creating an organizational framework with the Rukh and other unofficial political organizations, Ukrainians began to experiment with popular demonstrations. The first occurred on June 13, 1988 in Lviv. It was the result of authorities’ attempts at preventing the first meeting of the Ukrainian Language Society, a group in defense of Ukrainian cultural rights. The second, a few days later, fell on the day Estonia’s Communist leader was toppled. It was at that demonstration that the Democratic Front to Support Restructuring, nominally similar to Estonia’s Popular Front in Support of Restructuring, was imagined into existence. These demonstrations were beginning at the same time as movements throughout the Soviet Union were gaining traction through mass political action, and the movements, such as those in Czechoslovakia, East Germany and Hungary, were influential in showing Ukrainians the merits of nonviolent action, but specific tactics were much more immediate and accessible in the Baltic states. For example, on August 23, 1989, people from Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia formed a 600-kilometer human chain that not only physically connected their capital cities, but also metaphorically connected their movements and hopes for independence. The following January, Ukrainians embarked on a similar task, with some 300,000 people forming their own human chain from Kiev to Lviv to commemorate the 1918 proclamation of an independent Ukrainian state (Diuk & Karatnycky, 1990).

Ukrainians also picked up some tips from the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests in China. At that point, the students had yet to really mobilize, but upon seeing the Chinese students' capabilities and resilience in Tiananmen Square, they decided that they, too, could take meaningful action. In October 1990, students in Kiev abandoned the university and set up tents in what they renamed October Revolution Square and began a hunger strike. They created "a mini Tiananmen Square in the heart of Kiev." (Nahaylo, 1999, p. 311). This strike became the turning point of the Ukrainian movement. A couple weeks into it, the Ukrainian government gave in to all of the students' progressive demands and more, marking the beginning of the end for state leadership.

### **Reliance on More Than Prior Experience**

Inspiration flowed from all over the world. Ukrainians watched as the students in Tiananmen Square took to the streets and embarked on their hunger strikes, as peaceful nationalists demonstrated for Georgian independence in Tbilisi, and as police forces brutally mowed down both. But they also watched East Germans destroy the Berlin Wall, the most domineering symbol of Soviet oppression, without any government resistance. Diffusion via learning is essential for the growth and viability of a movement and Ukrainians realized this. As they watched the system they had known for decades crumble around them, they learned from the goals and tactics of each individual independence movement and ultimately tailored them to fit their own.

However, oppositional forces do not always need to learn about the effectiveness of nonviolence from their neighbors in order to lead a successful movement. Prior experience with opposition through nonviolent resistance is an important consideration



here. If a country already has a strong background in nonviolent resistance, it can draw largely from those past experiences when molding the current movement rather than from the experiences of those around them (Braithwaite, Maves Braithwaite, & Kucik, 2015). This was partly the case in Ukraine. Part of Gorbachev's reforms involved freeing political prisoners, many of which were locked up during the turbulence of the '60s that had scared Shelest so much. In the spillover from the Prague Spring, workers were arrested for distributing leaflets openly opposing Russification policies and protesting outside of official institutions; intellectuals were imprisoned for publishing pieces against the cultural tyranny of the Soviet state. They were sent to gulags where they sat, exchanging ideas with each other and solidifying their oppositional stances. Then, suddenly, Gorbachev secured their releases and the dissent ruminating within camp walls for years exploded.

Former political prisoners immediately took up where they left off twenty years ago, cranking out oppositional essays and leaflets en masse, publishing them in *samzidat* and distributing them around universities. They wrote mostly about the nationalist issues they had fought for in the '60s, but the relaxation of press censorship allowed room for a bit more. Their activism ventured beyond the written word and into public speeches at Ukraine's mass demonstrations. They had the ability to steer the discussion toward the national question and use it to further mobilize Ukrainian dissidents. Mykhailo Horyn, a former prisoner turned Rukh leader, spoke at the first mass demonstration in Lviv in 1988, and cyclically addressed students at a culminating one in 1990. Iryna Kalynets, who had spent years in prison with her husband, was a mass action consultant, so to speak, helping to organize demonstrations for organizations in need of assistance. These individuals and

more also began creating unofficial organizations to formalize their stances—Serhii Naboka, Leonid Milyavsky and Oles Shevchenko, all key figures in the Ukrainian movement, founded the Ukrainian Culturological Club; several, including Horyn, founded and fearlessly led the Rukh.

Like the environmental activists thrown into the political realm after Chernobyl, former political prisoners were very much the backbone of the Ukrainian movement. They used their experience with nonviolent tactics of resistance from the 1960s to create a grassroots independence movement in the late 1980s. However, times changed while they sat in the gulags. The experiences of the past were no longer all applicable. Former political prisoners had grown into activist adulthood under violently repressive Soviet regimes and therefore used more subversive tactics to avoid prosecution. But in the 1980s, Gorbachev's leadership, fueled from his democratic reforms, had largely committed to peace. "[The regime, which was] preoccupied with 'the war of laws' between the center and the sovereign Union republics, the declarations of sovereignty which were now also being made by autonomous republics within the Russian Federation and trying to secure support for its compromise economic reform program, did not intervene," writes Nahaylo (1999). There was a brief period of government repression in Ukraine after Gorbachev's 1988 public criticism of the country's nationalist tendencies, but even that did not originate from the top, only from the ranks of the Ukrainian Communist Party. With this general absence of government repression, dissidents could push boundaries and pursue bolder, more public tactics, with which they had very little experience. For their movement to fit with the times and continue to grow and evolve, it was necessary that they use the experiences of surrounding movements as guides.

### **Communicating Nonviolence**

Ukrainian dissidents were able to witness the experiences of their neighbors through exchanges of information, which Rogers breaks down into two categories: mass media and interpersonal communication channels. The former is the quickest and furthest reaching while the latter is the most trustworthy and the most likely to convince people to act (Rogers, 1983; Hill, Rothchild, & Cameron, 1998). Both channels are equally necessary for the diffusion of ideas and the perpetuation of the learning and emulation cycles. In Ukraine, they were both important for sharing with Ukrainians information about the anti-Soviet movements in Eastern Europe, from Czechoslovakia and East Germany to Poland and the Baltics, giving them the tools and the confidence to build their own successful movement.

Mass media channels disseminate information through mass media, namely television, radio and newspaper. Before Gorbachev, the Soviet Union had a monopoly on all these channels, blocking all access to foreign media and controlling local media publications. Soviet leadership claimed that “foreign stations were trying to undermine the Soviet system with hostile propaganda” (Schmemmann, 1988) and as a result, no information from the outside world was permitted to enter the republics. Ukraine was no exception. People would try and surpass these strict controls and pick up European broadcast by taking their shortwave radios outside of cities, where they were not as heavily jammed, but even those streams were inconsistent.

Glasnost weakened Soviet media controls considerably, opening the floodgates for information about the happenings beyond Ukraine’s borders to spread onto Ukrainian soil and into the minds of Ukrainian dissidents. The first step was the sudden cessation of

European radio broadcast jams. In 1987, the Soviet Union stopped jamming Russian-language shortwave broadcasts from the BBC and the Voice of America. The following year, signals within the republics were suddenly loud and clear from Radio Liberty, an American-financed station, Deutsche Welle, a West German station, and an Israeli radio station. These and numerous other European stations had been jammed since the 1950s, when shortwave broadcasts of a speech by President Eisenhower, in which he explicitly criticized Soviet policy in the Baltics, helped spur anti-government action in the republics. With these airwaves open, Ukrainians now had unparalleled access to information from and about the West, allowing them to truly witness what was going on around them.

Glasnost affected print media as well. Pre-existing publications began to push the boundaries of Gorbachev's censorship reforms. *Moscow News*, described by a Washington Post reporter living in Moscow as "a multi-language weekly once so boring that it used to pile up and gather dust next to Intourist brochures in hotel lobbies and airports," was one of the first Soviet-controlled media to do so. *Ogonyok*, a Soviet magazine, followed suit, publishing scathing exposés on police brutality as early as 1987. Similarly, *Literaturna Ukraina*, a state-sponsored Ukrainian paper, began addressing numerous inaccuracies in state recounts of history by releasing a series called "Pages of a Forgotten History" that exposed, for example, the countless Stalin-era crimes against the Ukrainian people. So much information about the Soviet Union's repressive history began coming out, in fact, that by mid-'88, the information in textbooks was so clearly inaccurate that history exams for the year had to be cancelled. "The unearthing of history produced a growing feeling of resentment against Soviet rule, a rediscovering of indigenous culture, a new insistence on national sovereignty." (Shane, 1994, p. 123)

Relaxed media censorship turned these publications into channels for information coming from the outside world. *Moscow News* accurately reported on demonstrations in Lithuania while other state-sponsored medium did not even address them. *Vzglyad*, a newer program on Soviet television's Channel One, reported hard-hitting stories about corruption in central Asia, demonstrations in Moscow and struggles in Afghanistan, but it also gave Soviet citizens a look into Western culture by showing music videos between each news segment.

News sources from neighboring republics were beginning to seep into Ukraine as well. Polish television was easily accessible in Lviv, only 30 miles from the border, delivering news about Solidarity's achievements to Ukrainians workers. *Atmoda*, the Latvian Popular Front's Russian-language newspaper, was an invaluable source of information for Ukrainians (Nahaylo, 1999). Dissidents in the Baltics printed independent publications with news from the region and smuggled them into Ukraine; Ukrainians in Poland printed tens of thousands of copies of Ukrainian books and periodicals and smuggled them across the border (Diuk, 1990).

Along side foreign broadcasts and newspapers, interpersonal communication channels were running lines into and throughout Ukraine as well. These communications occur between culturally similar people, highlighting the importance of geographic proximity in determining whether or not a communication will occur. This is evident in Ukraine as a bulk of the communications occurred with people from Poland and the Baltics. Ukraine's borders were relatively porous, especially when compared to East Germany for example, so travel in and out was not very restricted, allowing for a flow of people between the countries.

The most significant individual-level channel for spreading tactical information from the surrounding movements involved members of the Baltics' popular fronts. They were quite involved with the establishment of the Ukrainian popular front. For example, they were present at the Rukh's inaugural conference in Kiev on July 1, 1989. Michnik, Solidarity consultant and Editor in Chief of the *Gazeta Wyborcza*, Poland's pro-Solidarity and most heavily circulated daily newspaper, was there and he spoke at length about the connections between Poles and Ukrainians and their common goal of ending Russian imperialism. The chairman of Solidarity in the Gdansk region and a member of the Polish senate were also representing the Polish opposition movement. Members of Sajudis and the Latvian Popular Front were present as well. They spoke about their shared goal with Ukraine of achieving democracy by "following the Polish and Hungarian examples" (Nahaylo, 1999, p. 205).

The Ukrainian diaspora was another incredibly important channel for spreading general information to those living in Ukraine. During the period of Russification, the Soviet government cut ties with the Ukrainian diaspora, so when controls were loosened, it began to resurface. In Georgia's repressed 1989 demonstration, there were reports of the blue and yellow flag, symbolic of Ukrainian independence, being flown in the crowd. The flag was present at anti-government repression demonstrations in Moscow as well. Members of the diaspora also created formal organizations. From the Friends of Ukrainian Art and Culture to the Ukrainian People's Home in Toronto, Ukrainians had supportive communities all over the world. Finally, the diaspora began moving back to its homeland in droves, bringing with it news from beyond the border.

Foreigners flooded into Ukraine as well, attempting to seize the new business opportunities made available by perestroika. “There are elevator-loads of Japanese businessmen, anorexic ballerinas from Winnipeg, German film makers [sic], California fundamentalists carrying Bibles to Armenia,” writes a New York Times reporter in 1990, “One American I talked to has opened a Moscow branch of B.B.D. & O., in anticipation of the Soviet need for advertising.” (Johnson, 1990) Cultural and educational exchanges were arranged with Americans, with Ukraine sending handfuls of school children to the US and the US sending American students in return. After American officials visited the Donetsk region in 1989 to observe the miners’ strikes, an exchange was coordinated and nine Soviet miners were sent to the states to learn about American miners.

There was no shortage of outside information pouring into Ukraine. While it had existed for decades in a bubble of isolation, cut off from news about the modern world by intense Soviet media censorship policies, glasnost created an explosion of information, forcing open communication channels into the country. Through both mass media and interpersonal communication channels, Ukrainians were able to observe what was occurring around them, from the successful revolutions in the Baltics to the failed demonstrations in China, learning different nonviolent tactics from each and applying them to their own independence movement so it could grow, evolve and ultimately affect serious change.

The breadth of evidence presented in this chapter clearly outlines the importance of individual-level communications in the Ukrainian independence movement. However, this importance can also be defined by its absence, exhibited in the pre-glasnost era Soviet Union. Borders were closed, airwaves and broadcasts were blocked, travel was

restricted, Soviet history was rewritten. Communication channels only existed, far, far underground, but even there, dissidents were not safe from the tyranny of the Soviet regime. The result of this absence was a widespread disconnect between Soviet citizens and those of the outside world, with the former knowing little to nothing about the fast-paced modern lives of their Western counterparts.

Before Gorbachev's grand thaw, Soviet citizens could not rebel. Not only was the repressive system increasingly capable of eliminating all visible signs of resistance, but also they did not have the common goal of democratization spurring them forward. The absence of channels of communication with the Western world shielded Soviet citizens from their technological, medical and social advancements. They did not know what they were missing. They could not rise up against the regime because they had nothing concrete to strive for. They knew vaguely of greener pastures, but they did not know where, how or why they existed. It was not until glasnost and perestroika that they were able to put a face to the name "something better". The individual-level communications Gorbachev opened allowed them to literally see greener pastures in the West, and while these pastures may have been idealized, often beyond the point of being recognizable, at least dissidents finally had something tangible to idealize.

### **Conclusion**

The Ukrainian Communist Party fell on December 1, 1991 with an overwhelmingly positive referendum for independence. Decades of tireless blood, sweat and tears were no longer seen in vain, having cut into the party's foundation until it finally crashed to the ground with a resounding thud, reverberating throughout the region



and ultimately toppling the weak Soviet Union. However, the successful movement did not exist in a vacuum. There was no invisible boundary separating it from its revolutionary neighbors, bold dissidents who were pushing open doors and creating spaces for themselves in a Soviet-dominated state.

The movement was not an isolated event fueled by domestic factors alone, existing in disarray, as the world remained static around it. Instead, factors external to the country were crucial in determining the success of the movement. While domestic factors such as the environmental repercussions of Chernobyl and the flourishing Western Ukrainian nationalist revival were major impetuses in the creation of an anti-Soviet movement, they were not able to sustain it, to maintain its relevance in a constantly changing geopolitical climate. Instead, life was breathed into the fight for independence by the ebb and flow of people, ideas and information from the republics and greater democratic world that lay beyond the border. It would have never picked up the nonviolent tactics necessary for its success by remaining insular and working only with its prior experience with resistance.

Individual-level communications were crucial in the movement's success as well. They allowed information to flow into the country from dissidents beyond the border, directly influencing like-minded Ukrainian individuals and effectively pushing them to adopt relevant nonviolent tactics. The ability to draw from its neighbors' experiences with nonviolent resistance through these individual-level communications allowed the movement to grow into the well-rounded, adaptive and ultimately successful force it became.

Revolution had swept across Eastern Europe in the late 1980s, spreading from one country to another, each growing and building with the next. This wave of nonviolent, anti-Soviet diffusion severely battered the Soviet Union, and Ukraine was the final blow. Its independence, rooted in domestic issues but fueled, likewise, by the diffusion of nonviolent resistance from its neighbors, spelled the end of the Soviet Union. The next step was the diffusion of democracy and democratic institutions, a process that is still occurring today. But diffusion is never complete. People are continuously learning from each other and from their environments, so the question is never “When will this end?” but rather “What will this create?” and in the case of Ukraine, it created an open society free from the perils of Soviet control.

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