

Deep Demonstrations of Private Charity



by Theodore Dalrymple

The war in Ukraine notwithstanding, normal life has to continue, albeit with a faint feeling of guilt because so many millions of people have been displaced, abducted, killed, or turned into refugees a couple of hours' flight away. In the circumstances, it seems almost callous to go about one's petty business as if nothing extraordinary and terrible were happening. But what else can one do?

Yesterday, for example, despite the dramatic rise in the cost of fuel, I drove for my own pleasure 50 miles to a small town on the Welsh border, Hay-on-Wye, set in the loveliest of countryside. Hay was the first town in the world to devote itself to the sale of second-hand books, and though the shop trade is past its zenith, thanks to the internet and the declining importance of books in most people's lives, there are still sufficient sellers to make a visit always

worthwhile—at any rate for book-fanatics such as I. As an aficionado of both poetry and crime, I always visit the shops devoted to those subjects.

I was astonished en route to see how many Ukrainian flags and banners were to be seen in the unlikeliest places—remote farmhouses, pharmacy windows, antique shops, petrol stations, dentists' offices, ordinary homes.

Usually, I'm averse to easy demonstrations of solidarity because they're generally so cheap, shallow, and fickle or changeable. Yet somehow I felt that this was different from the general run of such demonstrations, that the demonstration was more deeply felt than usual. Certainly, I have never seen anything quite like it before: a real and spontaneous outpouring of genuine sympathy for a victim people, and dismay at the appalling destruction wrought by a dictator quite properly (for once) designated as neo-fascist.

No doubt it was a frivolous thought as I saw the Ukrainian flags fluttering from so many flag-staffs, but I couldn't help but admire the speed with which they had been manufactured and distributed, even if the Ukrainian flag is one of the simplest of all flags (and most tasteful). After all, not long before one would have been hard put to buy a Ukrainian flag in a provincial English or Welsh town; now they were everywhere to be seen. I could only hope that they were not manufactured in China like almost everything else, including the computer on which I write this: selling to both sides in a conflict being one of the most lucrative forms of commerce known.

That the feeling accompanying the display of the Ukrainian colors is deeper than is usually the case is demonstrated by the reaction to a proposed government scheme by which private citizens will be paid a modest monthly subvention if they will welcome Ukrainian refugees into their homes. A hundred thousand people signed up for it in a week, though one couple whom I know who did so remained skeptical as to whether the

government would ever be sufficiently organized (or motivated) to allow the entry of such numbers of refugees. There is no overstating the inconstancy and incompetence of Johnsonian Britain.

The idea of asking private individuals to open their homes to Ukrainian refugees was immediately criticized because of possible abuses by those individuals. The subvention offered (about \$460 a month) was not so large that anyone, or at any rate many people, would open their home simply to receive it; but, since most of the refugees will be females or children, they might be open to sexual predation or other forms of exploitation.

This, alas, is true: In a hundred thousand people, all types of human being are probably to be found. But I, who having spent years as a prison doctor am not starry-eyed about the possibilities of evil inherent in human nature, am not so misanthropic as to suppose that any but a very tiny and insignificant proportion of those who have offered to open their homes to Ukrainian refugees are motivated by the opportunity for sexual or other exploitation. The overwhelming majority, surely, are motivated by a laudable desire to relieve the appalling suffering that has been made evident to them by television, newspapers, social media, and the internet.

It's also possible that those who offer their homes to refugees might come to regret it, as people who buy a puppy for Christmas come to regret having done so once the responsibilities of dog-ownership become clear to them. Moreover, it's a certainty that among so large a number of refugees there will be some undesirable, ungrateful, demanding, exploitative, or even criminal characters: for again, in any such large number of human beings, all types are to be found. But they will be a small minority.

Another objection I have seen to the scheme is that it's

revelatory of hypocrisy. Why should we be so concerned by the plight of Ukrainian refugees when we are not similarly exercised by that of Sudanese or Yemeni refugees? Are not all people of equal worth or cause for concern? Is there not in our concern for Ukrainian refugees an implicit racism, a belief that people who resemble us physically and culturally are more valuable than others?

It would, unfortunately, take a long discussion of philosophical anthropology to show why this was wrong.

But I suspect (though as in most such questions I cannot prove) that the real objection to the scheme, whether or not it ever comes to pass in practice, is that it's a scheme of private [charity](#), relying on charitable feeling, that doesn't pass through the state. It isn't that those who object to the scheme don't want any Ukrainian refugees to be admitted to the country: they don't want the potential of real solidarity as exemplified by human beings who have not made of doing good a lucrative, pensionable career to be illustrated in this powerful fashion. They would far rather that the government set up barracks for refugees in which they received such cold charity as the state would allocate them, attended no doubt by an army of social workers, counselors, psychologists, trauma therapists etc., etc., in an alleged attempt to undo their misery, than that they should receive non-state human warmth from volunteers in scattered communities. For such people, all human solidarity must be expressed through taxation and the redistribution of taxation.

Incidentally, Poland and Hungary have reacted—so far at least, things may yet change—with exemplary humanity toward Ukrainian refugees, thus showing the hollowness of the charge against them that they are xenophobic. Their governments, unlike some others I could name, can tell the difference between refugees from war seeking immediate safety and economic migrants who have paid people smugglers large sums of money to get them not into the first safe country, but into the country of their

dreams.

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