

Review of *Serving Under Siege: How War Transformed a Ukrainian Community*

Serving God Under Siege: How War Transformed a Ukrainian Community. By Valentyn Syniy. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2025; 266 pages. Paperback. ISBN-13: 978-0802885692; \$24.00 USD.

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Valentyn Syniy (PhD, National Pedagogical Drahomanov University) has served as President of Tavriski Christian Institute, an evangelical seminary in Ukraine, since 2006. The release of *Serving God Under Siege* makes his monograph originally published in 2024 under the title *The Man Whose Home Was Stolen* in Ukrainian (*Людина, у якої вкрали дім*) and Russian (*Человек, у которого украли дом*) available to readers in English, particularly American readers based on the balance of illustrations included and spelling conventions employed. Syniy provides a first-hand account of leading a Christian institution of higher education located in Ukraine from February 2022 through November 2022—the first nine months of Russia's full-scale invasion—to promote general awareness about the present hostilities and cast a vision for rebuilding TCI's campus. A sampling of the formidable hardships and losses that he, his family, and his fellow Ukrainians endured because of the war are presented in a series of twenty-nine concise chapters that introduce a sequence of heart wrenching events in chronological fashion.

Chapter 1 locates the author in his home city of Kherson and overviews the warning signs of imminent military threat and TCI's preparations to evacuate which proved critical to institutional continuity once Russia initiated their sweeping campaign on February 24, 2022. Chapter 2 covers the immediate actions of the author and those closest to him upon learning the invasion had begun which ushered in an abrupt shift in status for many from settled to displaced. Chapter 3 follows the evacuees' movement to their preplanned contingency location in Ivano-Frankivsk some 540 miles (840 kilometers) from the TCI campus. Chapter 4 summarizes the refugees' pursuit of belonging in their new locale amid a steep learning curve regarding regional

distinctives between the subcultures of Kherson and Ivano-Frankivsk that yielded learning opportunities for refugees and hosts alike. Chapter 5 strikes a somber chord with news that Russian forces had occupied Kherson.

Chapter 6 sees the author wrestle with how best to contribute to the defense of his homeland and some of the stresses associated with embracing refugee care and support to suffering domestic churches. Chapter 7 documents an intentional pivot in the TCI mission from education to evacuation, compassion ministry to refugees, and support for those in temporarily occupied areas to include the necessary training, operational coordination, risk management, and logistical creativity. Chapter 8 highlights Protestant efforts to receive, process, and distribute global humanitarian aid for the relief of suffering and addresses some of the related ethical issues. Chapter 9 demonstrates the initiative taken by a group of like-minded seminary leaders in Ukraine to exercise their prophetic voices in the strategic domain where a contest raged—especially among academics in the region—to define the real purpose for the war. The Ukrainian allegation that Russia had attacked to deprive Ukraine of its right to self-determination, culture, language, and national identity was pitted against Russian insistence that they were reacting to Ukraine allowing themselves to be seduced by Western influences which, in turn, produced an untenable disunity among the Slavs. Chapter 10 focuses on a variety of pathways for effective personal renewal such as rhythms of daily prayer, theological reflection, and pet care.

Using the occasion of Easter Sunday, chapter 11 considers the propensity of large-scale combat operations to diffuse the perceived sacredness of any certain holiday and elevate the notion that each day is a gift to be celebrated. Chapter 12 introduces meaningful initiatives for responding to an increasing sentiment of separation from the patterns that existed before evacuation through the use of photography, employment searches, TCI offering business grants, and actively supporting soldiers at the front. Chapter 13 shares how TCI reacted to an uptick in interest in theological studies with a new slogan driven by the need to train pastors to fill vacant pulpits in Ukraine and stand in opposition to those Orthodox clergy leveraging their authority in support of Russian political and military narratives to manipulate Ukrainian congregants. Chapter 14 acknowledges the agility of TCI in creating a welcoming space for students to gather and build healthy friendships. Chapter 15 warns against the serious pitfalls of unbridled optimism and the subtle threat of compassion fatigue and burnout.

Chapter 16 delves into the war's effect on shortening the marriage engagement timelines, reducing alcohol demand, and increasing divorce rates. Chapter 17 further unpacks how the war bolstered understanding about cultural differences between the various regions of Ukraine and created a conversation about the mutual enrichment stemming from discovering such abundant diversity. Chapter 18 succinctly examines collaborative theological responses to the widely publicized atrocities that occurred in and around Bucha. Chapter 19 confronts a dark side of volunteer ministry to desperate people: the proclivity of some volunteers to become addicted to expressions of gratitude from recipients. Chapter 20 recognizes the tension that

exists between transparency in financial accountability, the latitude to minister in a spirit of modesty, and connected ethical pitfalls.

Chapter 21 tells of the excitement and acute challenges that TCI faced at the start of the Fall 2022 semester and the corresponding reinvigoration of their educational mission. Chapter 22 recounts TCI celebrating their twenty-fifth anniversary while still displaced and imparts some key aspects of TCI's history. Chapter 23 paints a picture of the emotional deformation suffered by Ukrainians through protracted conflict. Chapter 24 chronicles the author's travel to the United States—a trip which afforded him the chance to engage supporters, grow awareness about the war, reflect on the preciousness of seemingly small acts of kindness, and reconnect with some of his family members. Chapter 25 depicts a late-night video call in which the author joined selected Christian leaders from Ukraine in an attempt to persuade a European colleague with pro-Russian sympathies of the moral illegitimacy of Russia's war aims in Ukraine.

Chapter 26 heralds the moment, while the author was still in the United States, when news broke that Kherson had been liberated. Chapter 27 describes the author's return to Kherson to see what remained. Chapter 28 reveals his experiences on the TCI campus, and Chapter 29 communicates what he encountered upon returning to his family's empty house.

Syniy's characterization of his book as a confession appears appropriate in that he immerses the reader's senses in his vivid and sometimes raw reflections on the myriad complexities in stewarding an academic institution through a major geopolitical crisis. But the content arguably extends beyond a confession in that it offers a candid testimony of one Christian leader's applied theology in a keenly trying season. Syniy is careful to convey gratitude for the myriad acts of God's relentless provision. He does not withhold his convictions about the justice of the Ukrainian cause and the abject bankruptcy of the trajectory prosecuted by Russia. His sharp critiques levied against Vladimir Putin, instances of inexcusable conduct by the Russian military, and the deafening silence heard from Russian Christians echo consistently across the pages. The English prose is remarkably clean and erudite with the rare exception of using an arcane word (i.e., kindly, thrice) or bouncing between metric and imperial units of measure in a way that might make American readers grin.

One of the book's foremost contributions is the manner in which he exemplifies a framework for interdenominational collegiality without compromising his own evangelical Baptist identity. The way he and cooperating seminary presidents and church leaders boldly refused to be "held back by denominational boundaries" (163) diminished tribal and cultural obstacles, fostered unity, and led to more substantive teamwork. Such interoperability warrants commendation.

The author's engagement of pacifism could have been explored more comprehensively and placed in conversation with other historical Christian positions on warfare—at least Just War Theory and perhaps non-resistance and crusade perspectives also. He mentions military chaplains several times but could have strengthened his overall case on calling by overtly linking the dual calling manifested in these who

practice religious leadership in parallel with duty to the state. If an American audience is to be assumed, then the choice to borrow Eastern European norms concerning the rarity of hunting animals and assume hunters generally have questionable motives compared to farmers might have been revised to maximize connectivity with certain readers.

This timely memoir provides a helpful optic for Christian leaders to gain appreciation for the importance of cultivating personal and organizational readiness in responding to crises of various types. While the tone and style are easily digestible on a popular level, Christian academics will find immediate solidarity with the struggle portrayed. The principles contained are even more relevant now given the ongoing need for a just peace in Ukraine. As many long for that day, Syniy's assertion about the God of the Bible remains true: "He has not forgotten the recipe of manna in the desert" (143).

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