

*HELIUM
REVOLUTIONARIES*

Art by Mark Kelner • Text by Alex van Oss

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Joan of Arc

Patron Saint of France

c. 1412–1431

The forces of history can so quickly raise up heroes — and also tear them down. Was Joan a saint, savior, victim, or a dupe? Did the inner voices she heard come from the divine or were they mere firings of neurons? One thinks of Putin and his inner voices as he leads Russians into his dreams and, perhaps, into catastrophe. What price glory?



Winston Churchill

Statesman, Soldier, Writer, and
Prime Minister of the United Kingdom
1874–1965

At the 1945 Yalta Conference, Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt hashed out an agreement with Stalin to repatriate persons displaced by World War Two, including Ukrainians. This resulted in unintended and tragic consequences, as not all displaced Soviets wished to return to the USSR, and many Ukrainians even committed suicide rather than face hard labor in the Gulag, or execution by Stalin. But that was then, and now, in July, 2022, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson awarded Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky the Sir Winston Churchill Leadership Award.

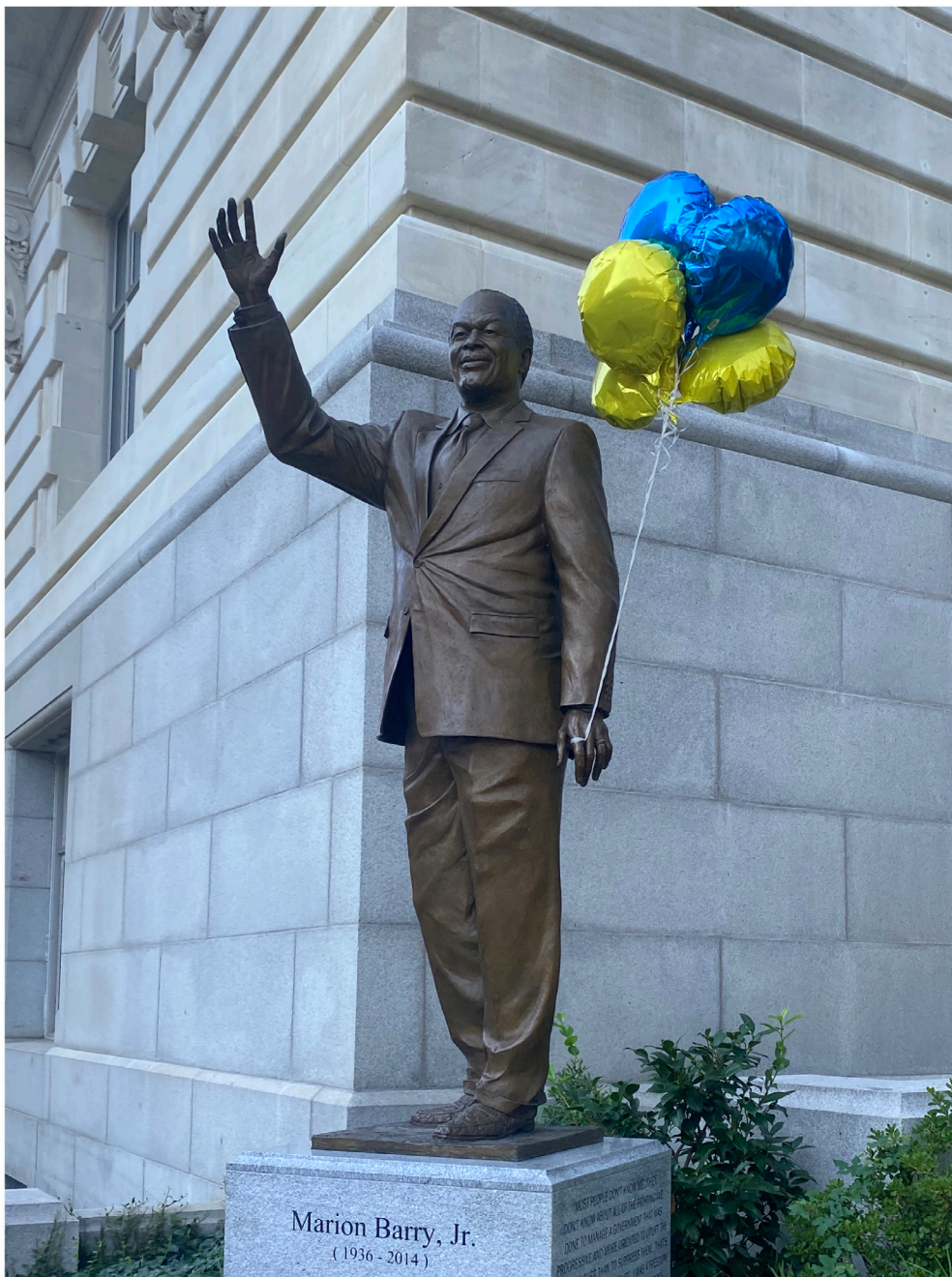


Marion Barry

“Mayor for Life” of the District of Columbia

1936–2014

I can well imagine the late Mayor taking up the Ukrainian cause, what with his intimate experience of prejudice and the demonizing of peoples, and the sheer hard slog of moving along what so hopefully is called the “arc of history.”



John F. Kennedy

35th President of the United States

1917–1963

“Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty.”

— Inaugural address, January 20, 1961

JFK contended several times with Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, most notably in 1962, during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Fortunately, they negotiated and stepped back from the brink of nuclear conflict. Khrushchev governed Ukraine for a decade, and it was he who, in 1954, transferred Crimea from Russian to Ukrainian administration.



Alexander Pushkin

Russian Poet

1799–1837

There are busts and statues of Pushkin all over Ukraine—or were: in a score of towns and cities in Ukraine they are this year being dismantled as symbols of Russification (a process called by the punning word: ‘Pushkinopad’—i.e. Pushkinfall). This is a pity because Pushkin was a complex writer who spent four years in exile in Ukraine, and made later visits. Moreover, Pushkin gave the Ukrainian-born writer Nikolai Gogol an entry ticket into Russian literary circles; he studied Ukrainian folklore and song; and several times wrote about anti-tsarist Cossack rebels (but of course from a 19th-century imperialist perspective, because Pushkin was being closely watched and censored by the Tsar). On his statue in central Moscow one can read “Exegi Monumentum,” a rousing verse that honors the poet’s gift, and the power of his words to inspire and to unite all the peoples within Russia. Interestingly, what at first comes across as bragging quickly turns to humility, as Pushkin bows before his muse and calls for mercy upon the fallen.



АЛЕКСАНДР ПУШКИН

Abraham Lincoln

16th President of the United States

1809–1965

“The struggle of today, is not altogether for today—
it is for a vast future also.”

—In a message to Congress, December 3, 1861

One thinks of Lincoln as being a man of sometimes harsh
action, yet also of forbearance, and even forgiveness.

An intriguing clue to his character lies in the “Doctrine
of Necessity”: Lincoln’s conviction that individuals act
not according to free will, or moral choice, but as they
must—being controlled by conditioned “motives,”
inheritance, family background, and circumstances.

It is possible that this austere Doctrine led to Lincoln’s
pessimistic, yet clear, and ultimately charitable assessment of
the actors in war?

That said, how would Lincoln have viewed Putin,
Zelensky, and the situation in Ukraine today? Would the
Doctrine of Necessity hold?



Eleanor Roosevelt

Diplomat, Activist, and First
Lady of the United States
1884–1962

“Courage is more exhilarating than fear and in the long run it is easier. We don not become heroes overnight. Busy one step at a time, meeting each thing that comes up, seeing it is not as dreadful as it appeared, discovering we have the strength to share it down.”

— From “You Live by Learning” (1960)

At the UN, in 1946, Eleanor Roosevelt wrangled with Soviet delegates over terms regulating the return of Ukrainians and other wartime “displaced persons” to the USSR (later the term ‘refugee’ was used to recognize the unwillingness of many to go back to their homeland). Roosevelt advocated for refugees’ rights and freedom from persecution in their home countries. She served as the first chair of the UN Human Rights Commission, and oversaw the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.



George Mason

Virginian, Founding Father
of the United States
1725–1792

“Considering the natural lust for power so inherent in man,
I fear the thirst of power will prevail to oppress the people.”

Virginia planter, US Founding Father, and almost exact contemporary of Catherine II (the Great) of Russia (1729–1796). They never met: Mason rarely traveled outside of Virginia. Empress Catherine was a patron of the arts and promoter of the sciences. During her reign, Russia gained the status of world power, its borders expanding far to the east and south to include Crimea and “Novorossiya,” on the north coast of the Black Sea. These areas constitute the southern portion of Ukraine. Catherine founded Odessa, Kherson, and other cities now much in the news.



ALL MEN ARE BORN EQUALLY FREE AND INDEPENDENT
AND HAVE CERTAIN INHERENT NATURAL RIGHTS
AMONG WHICH ARE THE ENJOYMENT OF LIFE
AND LIBERTY WITH THE MEANS OF ACQUIRING
AND POSSESSING PROPERTY AND PURSUING AND
OBTAINING HAPPINESS AND SAFETY.

Taras Shevchenko

Bard of Ukraine

1814–1861

Decades ago I studied Russian in college. One of my classmates, Yuriy, from New Jersey, was an intriguing fellow who smoked a long pipe, occasionally wore embroidered shirts and vests, and hung sausages from the ceiling of his dorm room. Yuriy was my introduction to Ukraine. On a trip to Manhattan, he took me to Surma's, a Greenwich Village store that from 1918–2016 sold all-things-Ukrainian, including honey, books, painted eggs, and embroidered shirts and blouses. I couldn't fathom Yuriy's Ukrainian, which sounded sort of like Russian, but wasn't. Yuriy told me about the poet Taras Shevchenko—born a serf, an accomplished artist, and national poet of Ukraine—and the statue in D.C. whose unveiling Yuriy had witnessed as a boy. Later I would have occasion to wander the library stacks at Georgetown University and pick up obscure Russian tomes or try to read Shevchenko's long verses in Ukrainian. It all seemed so exotic. Now I see Shevchenko's statue almost daily and have attended many gatherings there. Sometimes the banners and ribbons were orange, now they're yellow and blue. What will they be in the future?



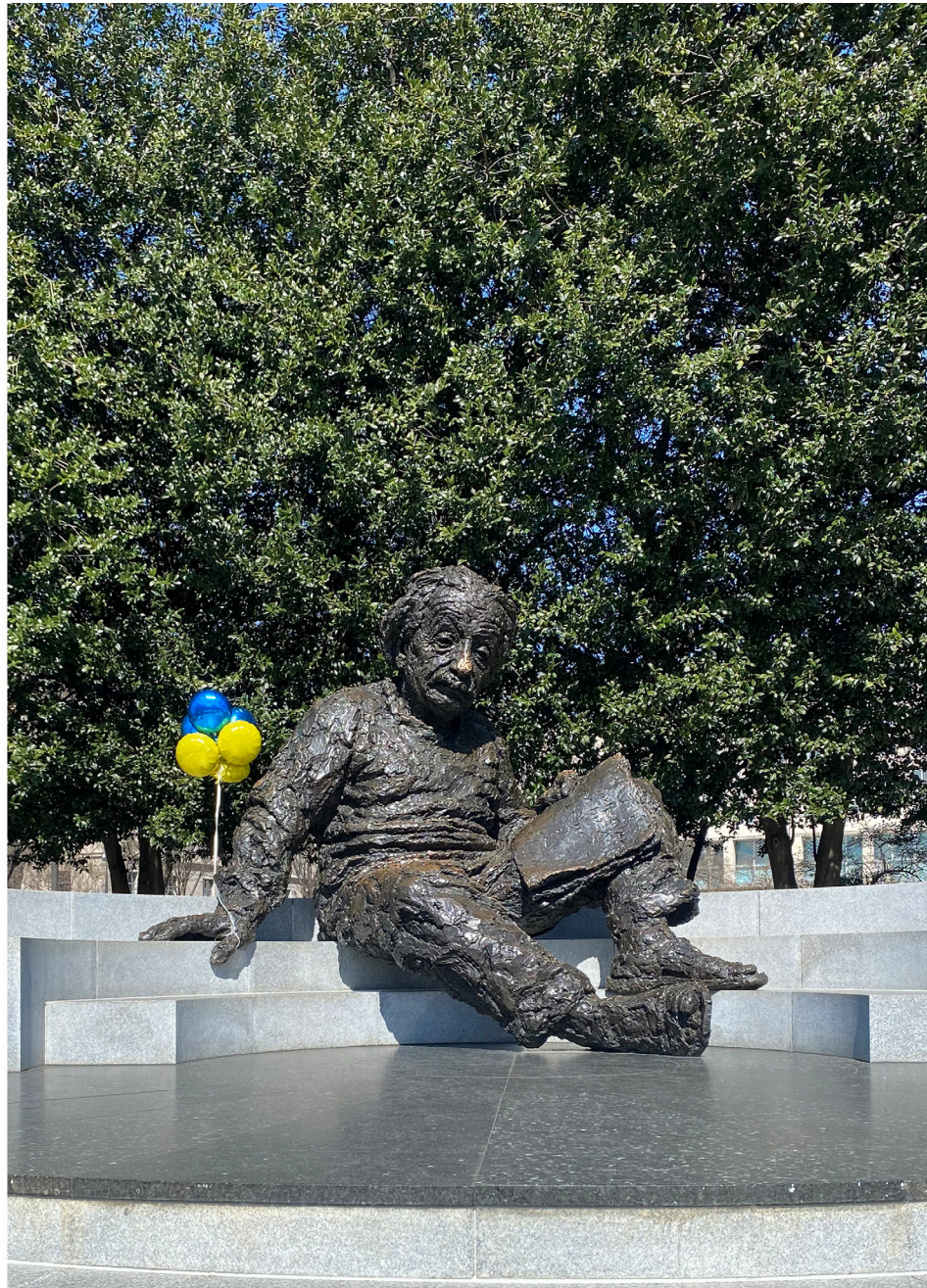
TARAS
SHEVCHENKO
1814-1861
BARD OF UKRAINE

Albert Einstein

Physicist

1879–1955

Einstein helped usher in the Atomic Age and warned of its dangers. For decades, governments advocated nuclear power and cast a blind, or least a tolerant eye on its dangers. American anti-nuke demonstrations and disasters (such as Three Mile Island) had little effect on public policy. It took the 1986 Chernobyl disaster, with its radioactive fallout affecting huge swathes of Europe, to do that. Now Russian and Ukrainian troops fight in and around Chernobyl and the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plants, turning them into potentially catastrophic pawns of war.



Nelson Mandela

Political Prisoner and
1st President of South Africa
1918–2013

To be incarcerated for 27 years and then to emerge and forgive one's jailers—imagine! Mandela, though not a pacifist, not only endured but transcended apartheid. He didn't have to set up South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, but did so nonetheless. What will come out of the Ukraine war: reparations? Or recriminations and return to trauma? Will a Nelson Mandela emerge?



Mahatma Gandhi

Indian Lawyer

1869–1948

Gandhi maintained an earnest communication with Leo Tolstoy. Indeed, the Russian writer's ideas about war and peace, external and internal, helped Gandhi formulate his own concept of "Satyagraha," non-violent resistance. Ukraine of course has not chosen the path of non-violence in its response to Russia's invasion.



ARTIST STATEMENT

It had to be done, so I did it.

On the campus of George Washington University just a few blocks from the White House, there is a memorial to the great Russian poet, Alexander Pushkin. I believe him to be the poet whose work is most rooted in the idea of the Russian identity. I'm not mad at the Russian people: I love their culture, I love their literature. What is happening is the doing of one evil person and the oligarchs, bureaucrats, and pundits who support him. As an artist whose own cultural duality between East/West has been the rooting of a professional practice, it would irresponsible not to activate in some visual way to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The bombing of Kyiv started on the Thursday prior to what I thought would be my only "balloon action." It is very bittersweet to have assembled a collection of twelve over the course what is now a year of war. Much like President Zelensky, each of these "Helium Revolutionaries" have impacted the world for the better. And in the end, this is all about recognizing the role played by history, public sculpture, and a bouquet of mylar balloons in making something old seem relevant again.

—*Mark Kelner*
February 2023

Mark Kelner is a visual artist and filmmaker based in Washington, DC and Brooklyn. His work has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *Hyperallergic*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Times* among other media outlets and has been exhibited in New York, Los Angeles, Paris, and Tokyo.

Alex van Oss has been a longtime producer and reporter for NPR and other networks. From 2003-2014 he coordinated Caucasus Area Studies at the Foreign Service Institute.

