



BOOK REVIEW

A Review of Syniy's *A Man Whose Home Was Stolen: The Struggle for Freedom*

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Syniy, Valentyn. 2024. *Людина, у якої вкрали дім: Боротьба за свободу* [*A Man Whose Home Was Stolen: The Struggle for Freedom*]. Kyiv. 332 pp., ill.

Also published in English: Syniy, Valentyn. 2025. *Serving God Under Siege: How War Transformed a Ukrainian Community*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans. 225 pp.

Valentyn Syniy's *A Man Whose Home Was Stolen: The Struggle for Freedom* is a personal account of the experience of the Tavriskii Christian Institute (TCI) during Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The difference between the Ukrainian and English titles is suggestive: while the former foregrounds the loss of home, the latter emphasizes Christian service and communal transformation. Both dimensions are central to Syniy's narrative.

As president of TCI, Syniy led the evacuation of the institution, its employees, and their families from Kherson to Ivano-Frankivsk in western Ukraine. From the beginning of the full-scale invasion, Kherson came under attack by Russian forces advancing from the temporarily occupied Crimea. Syniy recounts the dangerous evacuation, the physical and psychological challenges of displacement, the material and human losses suffered by TCI, and how he and other displaced people confronted them.

The nine months of Kherson's occupation became a period of profound reflection for Syniy and the TCI community. Displacement brought new opportunities for ministry and fostered mutual hospitality between Christians from southern and western Ukraine, helping overcome regional prejudices and strengthen unity within the Ukrainian Christian community.

The book concludes with Syniy's visit to liberated Kherson in November 2022, where he saw the devastation of TCI. His own home survived, but some neighbors had left the country, some were no longer alive, and the familiar world had been permanently altered. It could never again be what it had been before February 24, 2022, giving the Ukrainian title both literal and symbolic meaning.

Among the many important themes raised by Syniy, three deserve particular attention because they concern rethinking the mission of a Christian educational institution, its identity, and its partnerships under conditions of crisis.

When the ordinary conditions for fulfilling TCI's educational mission—preparing Christian ministers—suddenly disappeared, the very understanding of ministry changed. Education became practical service to the Ukrainian people in wartime. What had been taught as theological conviction now required immediate embodiment—from what was taught to what had to be lived. Preaching the truth was no longer enough: it had to be embodied in concrete service to people who needed food, medicine, and rescue.

When Kherson was occupied and the TCI building was destroyed and looted, Syniy and the other members of the institute had to reconsider the institution's identity. Syniy writes, "Before the war, I often taught students that the mission does not depend on infrastructure. Having lost all the infrastructure, I understand that we have to fulfill our mission regardless of where we live or what resources we have. But, to be honest, it is much harder to fulfill the mission without infrastructure!"¹ (Syniy 2024, 263). The war tested not only TCI's ability to survive but also its understanding of itself as a community rather than a building with a library and equipment. Syniy acknowledges that although TCI is a community rather than its infrastructure, it is much harder for that community to function without infrastructure. This tension between spiritual identity and material dependence is one of the book's important themes. His honesty is significant because he does not turn the loss of infrastructure into an occasion for unrealistic spiritual declarations.

In general, honesty is among the book's strengths. Syniy notes that he has always valued partnerships, accountability, and transparency, but that under wartime conditions they have taken on even greater importance. He addresses the tension between the need to publicize ministry and the need for caution, even secrecy, during wartime, as well as the temptation among some volunteers to exaggerate their achievements to attract resources. Reflecting on the difficulty of reporting ministry without turning it into self-promotion, he writes: "I often worry about whether I am becoming a church functionary. Am I becoming a church bureaucrat? I want to find the balance between ministry and honesty. Is it possible to inform people about projects on social media while at the same time maintaining simplicity, humility, and modesty?" (Syniy 2024, 244).

¹ Translations from Ukrainian are my own.

The question of honesty extends beyond reporting on one's own ministry. Syniy also reflects on the severing of partnerships with Russian churches and institutions whose leaders, in his assessment, showed no willingness to condemn Russian aggression or even express sympathy for Ukrainian Christians who became displaced and lost homes, relatives, friends, churches, and educational institutions. Syniy characterizes such an attitude as dishonest and unacceptable.

Thus, in Syniy's book, war emerges not only as a test of the ability of Christian institutions to act in a crisis but also as a test of their values and relationships. Mission, identity, and partnership prove to be connected by a common demand for honesty: honesty about who a Christian community is, what it does, and where it turns for help.

Syniy's book is a personal eyewitness account and should therefore be read primarily as a subjective narrative of lived experience rather than as a systematic documentary study. The events and phenomena it describes are presented through the author's personal perceptions, thoughts, and feelings and, if used as factual evidence, require comparison with other sources. Some of the tendencies Syniy describes—for example, his observation that many Christians lost their faith and left the church as a result of the war, while even more nonbelievers turned to God—remain personal observations rather than statistically substantiated conclusions.

This, however, does not diminish the book's value as testimony or as a subject for reflection. For Christians involved in academic and educational work, it offers an account of how believers acted and rethought their ministry under extraordinary circumstances. Its significance extends beyond the Ukrainian experience of war: the experience of TCI raises broader questions about how Christian institutions respond to large-scale crises, including natural disasters, displacement, and the loss of institutional infrastructure.

At the same time, the significance of the book extends beyond its practical lessons and informational value. Syniy's personal testimony has another important dimension: through imagination, it allows readers to draw closer to the experience of people in critical circumstances. Unlike a purely documentary account, which conveys facts, figures, and general tendencies, a personal narrative allows readers to imagine a concrete human reality. The book thus not only informs readers about the experience of a Ukrainian Christian community during the war but also fosters empathy with those who find themselves in similar circumstances.

This capacity to evoke empathy extends beyond the Ukrainian context. Readers can see in the experience of TCI not only the story of a particular community but also a possible experience of any Christian community that suddenly loses its home, resources, and security. Both dimensions of the book—its informational value and its capacity to cultivate imagination and

compassion—are therefore important. The first helps readers understand what happened; the second enables them to see what it means to live through such an experience as a human being and as a Christian community.

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