New Nonfiction by Alan Stoskopf: If I Don’t Create, I Don’t Exist

The scars of war are everywhere in Kharkiv. Destroyed or damaged apartment complexes, stores, hospitals, museums, and schools litter its urban landscape. The Russian full-scale invasion of February 2022 has not just killed or injured thousands of the city’s residents it has embedded itself into the psyches of young and old living in Ukraine’s second largest city. Yet, people carry on despite living under the dark shadow of Russia less than 20 miles away.

Learning to Fly: The Army and The Airborne Mafia

Sometimes in life, one experiences a shock or a revelation so powerful that it stays with you for years. For me, one such shock occurred at the Yavoriv training area in Western Ukraine, in June of 2015, embedded with the 173rd Airborne Brigade, which was training about 2,000 members of Ukraine’s National Guard. The shock was seeing Ukrainian troops (many of whom had been rotated back to training from the front lines) performing at a level of competence equal to *or even exceeding* what I’d seen in U.S. forces during my time as an airborne infantry officer (from 2006-08, with the 173rd).

Adrian and a former colleague from Afghanistan catching up at

Yavoriv circa 2015. Photo by Jack Crosbie.

The Ukrainians were unafraid of speed. Going door to door clearing a village of "separatists" they demonstrated a violence of action I hadn't seen in years. These weren't tier 1 units, they weren't Delta or Rangers, they were regular units, albeit those who'd already seen some combat. Their practice runs were filled with the type of urgency and energy every commander hopes for in troops on the offense. For the first time, an assumption I had about Ukraine and Russia – essentially, that Russia would inevitably win – was challenged. Moreover, an assumption I'd had *about American* military formations was challenged. When I tested that assumption of mine, that the U.S. military was there to train the badly equipped, demoralized, hapless Ukrainians, many paratroopers with the 173rd confirmed my suspicion, stating that they'd learned as much from the Ukrainians as they'd taught them. Some paratroopers went further, saying that the only thing Americans were really good for was as a delivery mechanism for bullets, that this was all the Ukrainians needed.

That was a bit much; Ukrainians I spoke with were deeply grateful for the training provided by the 173rd. More than the bullets, they were also grateful for the process that American paratroopers used to approach training – backward planning, the deliberate design of a program from the end result (outcome) to the beginning inputs. That process, that ability to project out desired results and carefully and methodologically build up to them in a way that took the trainees capabilities and desired end state into account, was not something that was part of most Ukrainians' experience. The extent to which serious and deliberate training had ever been part of the Red Army once upon a time had withered over years of corruption and disuse. The 173rd, for its part, put the lessons it learned from Ukrainians to excellent use,

compiling a remarkable document covered by author and journalist Wesley Morgan in 2017.

There in Yavoriv, watching the Ukrainians train, and the 173rd Airborne Brigade train them, I thought about how suitable it was for my former unit to be offering the training. It occurred to me there that an effective military reflects the culture and society of the country it serves, and also that a culture and society supports a military that reflects its values. There is a kind of virtuous harmony between the two. I also thought then, remembering my own service with the 173rd, how perfectly appropriate the airborne infantry (which prizes decentralized authority for decision-making and mission accomplishment) is for a people who prize democratic values and value as much political and economic authority as possible pushed down to the individual citizen level. Historically, those armies have always punched far above their weight.

Rob Williams, a former paratrooper with the 173rd – who, incidentally, deployed to Afghanistan at the same time that I did (2007-2008) though with the Brigade's 2nd Battalion (I was in its 1st Battalion) – has written an excellent book describing why and how that came to pass. *The Airborne Mafia*, out this March through Cornell University Press, covers the evolution of airborne operations from WWII to the present moment. It also examines how a small group of airborne leaders who emerged from WWII had an outsize effect on the shape and culture of the U.S. Army (and indirectly, on the military) after WWII.

> Rob Williams' new book explores how airborne leaders during and after WWII shaped the Army, and the military.

The history isn't simple, but the connective tissue is clear.

Astonished by what it saw the Nazi military accomplish in WWII with airborne power, from the Wehrmacht's key (and tactically unimpeachable) deployment during the initial blitzkrieg of Belgium and the low countries to German paratroopers' Phyrric seizure of Crete, U.S. war planners became obsessed with fielding their own airborne capabilities. Williams catalogues the development of those forces in training and in war, highlighting key lessons in combat from Salerno to Normandy and beyond. These experiences formed the "seed" of the Airborne mafia.

Over the coming decades, that seed, carried by those leaders who had practiced airborne warfare in WWII (names with whom military aficionados and airborne infantrymen are familiar, including Gavin, Taylor, and Ridgeway) guided and advocated for the evolution of that force within the Army even as they defended it from hostile and competing influences, including (I was surprised to learn) a recalcitrant Air Force that wanted full control over all air assets but was actively hostile to serving as a ferry for Army combat power it believed technology had rendered obsolete.

Through Korea, Vietnam, and the Cold War, the key principles of the airborne infantry (radical decentralization of mission control down to the individual soldier level) were emphasized and spread, until the active-duty military became, on a certain fundamental philosophical level, *indistinguishable* from an airborne unit. This was the case when I was in the military on active duty, and as far as I can tell – again, on a fundamental level – is the case today.

Moreover, though he doesn't put too much weight on this assertion (his focus is the airborne), Mr. Williams also makes a credible case for the importance of the airborne and the Airborne Mafia to the birth and growth of special operations. Both formally in terms of capabilities, and also culturally in the infusion of airborne noncommissioned officers into Rangers and Special Forces during Vietnam (the sort of career path

described in *Apocalypse Now*), which in turn led to the development of CAG and other elite formations that form the heart of what people think of as America's warrior elite, the airborne was a vehicle that carried special operations forward into the modern era.

The Airborne Mafia is a necessary work. Not only because it's always necessary to lay out important information that's visible with complete clarity in retrospect, but because in describing how the Army came to embody the ideals of the airborne infantry, Williams also offers a compelling defense for the airborne going forward in the 21st century. No force save the Marines has come in for as much criticism as the airborne; no force save the Marines has been faced with extinction as many times. The critics of Marines and the airborne are legion: too expensive, strategically unnecessary, tactically wasteful, worse than useless. But those same critics rarely (if ever) consider the upside. That upside: that decentralized 21st century warfare is most effectively trained by the airborne, in the airborne, and is most effectively prosecuted *by* leaders who have been raised and trained in that "paratrooper" mentality. Paratroopers embody combined arms warfare as much as they depend on it for survival; they are at the heart of a modern and effective combined arms force just as much as their leaders helped build that force. Without them, that force will crumble; without that combined arms military, the future of the United States becomes uncertain.

I will take it a step further. While Mr. Williams does not say it in the book, I believe the Airborne still has a role in the conventional Army for the 21st century *as the airborne* – that 20,000 or 30,000 paratroopers, descending from the sky by parachute, can ruin an enemy's defensive plans or blunt or parry an enemy's dangerous offensive operation. Recent hyper fixation in certain quarters on special operations "Sicario"

style strike teams and the usual chorus of voices claiming that technology (drones, missiles, etc.) have changed warfare forever notwithstanding, I believe – I *know* – that so long as the U.S. fields a healthy and capable airborne arm, that the military is in good shape, and reflective of the democratic values and principles our country still – for the moment – holds dear. When we cannot take to the sky to descend at a time and place of our choosing, it will be one more sign that the days of the United States are numbered.

New Fiction by Dwight Curtis: "The Thirty-Two Fouettes"

The chair came to a stop and with great effort, haltingly, the figure lifted himself to his feet. He took a single jerky step forward onto the stage and the wheelchair receded from view. It was Lypynsky: it couldn't have been anyone else, though he no longer looked like the man in the poster. His face was gone. There was a general din in the room as people whispered and other people shushed them. I would have been surprised if Lypynsky knew or cared: he had no ears. He wore a skull cap over his waxy, featureless egg head. The hat was the same off-white cotton as the rest of his outfit. He moved across the stage with short staccato steps, favoring his left leg, his ballet shoes scraping the wood as he moved, and when he reached center-stage he turned to face the room. The skin of his face was a shiny mottled camouflage of skintones but missing key features: no eyebrows, one eye completely gone, covered by what must have been a graft, the other eye hooded and searching. His nose was two snakelike slits. Where his upper lip should have been were beautiful tall white teeth that shone under the stage lights.

New Poetry by Phillip Sitter: “Krakivets, Odyn” and “Elemental”

New Poetry by Phillip Sitter: “Krakivets, Odyn” and “Elemental”

New Fiction by Sándor Jászberény: “Honey”

1.

A rocket hit the village. I woke up to the sound of the explosion. My eyes widened, I jumped out of bed, put on my bulletproof vest, grabbed my helmet and boots and headed for the door. Another missile hit nearby. The ground shook and the wooden beams of the house creaked. I heard nothing but the beating of my blood in my forehead. My nostrils flared, my muscles tensed. The adrenaline was making me unable to think. I was ready to run out into the night in my underwear.

“Calm down, there’s nothing wrong,” said Petya from his bed across the room. He was a miner from Kharkiv. A hundred and twenty kilos of fat and muscle, with dog eyes and a raspy baritone voice. When he slept, the wooden building shook from his snoring. It was like sharing a room with a bear.

“It’s ok,” he repeated. “They are randomly shooting the hill.”

He sounded as if talking to a child who had a bad dream. Not that I knew how he talked to his son, but his tone suggested the whole Russian invasion was just a bad dream, with missiles thundering down.

My mind began to clear.

I knew if the place took a direct hit, I’d be dead before I could run anywhere, and if it didn’t, it would be pretty pointless to run out into the night.

Yet this was always my reaction when the missiles hit too close.

Petya, seeing my confusion, got up, pulled his backpack out from under the bed, and took out a jar. “Come, have some honey,” he said. His English was terrible, but I hardly noticed anymore.

I got up and walked over to the window that yawned into the night. Petya unscrewed the lid off the jar and drew his knife. I took my knife out of my vest pocket, dipped it in the jar, and ran my tongue down the blade.

There was thick, black honey in the jar. Not the sickeningly sweet stuff you get in the store.

“I was dreaming about my wife,” he said.

“I wasn’t dreaming about anything.” I gripped the knife tightly so he wouldn’t see my hand tremble.

“We were in little house in Ilovaisk, the one I tell you about. Her father’s house.”

“And?”

“The kids were in bed and she was in kitchen cleaning up.”

“Do I have to listen to one of your sex stories? It’ll give me nightmares.”

“Did not get to sex. I was smelling her hair when the Russians woke me up and fucked up my dream.”

“Too bad.”

“They fucked up your dream too.”

“I wasn’t dreaming anything.”

“You will if you stay here long enough.”

“You know perfectly well this is my last day at the front.”

“What time is it?”

“The sun will rise in two hours.”

There were crimson hints of dawn on the horizon as we stood by the window. We sipped our instant coffees, smoked, and watched the sparkling shards of glass in the grass under the windowpanes.

2.

They had found a bunk for me in a ghost village with the 72nd Ukrainian Motorized Rifle Division two weeks earlier. The place was on a hillside next to a coal-fired power station lake. A narrow concrete bridge cut across the lake, the only way into the town on the far side. Wild ducks nested in the mud under its pillars.

Gray block houses stared at us from the opposite hillside. The Ukrainians had put the artillery units between the buildings, but there were still plenty of people living in the town.

In the evenings, the lights in the apartments winked out as the village plunged into total darkness, with residents avoiding any signals that could reveal the soldiers’ sleeping

locations to the Russian artillery.

The cannons rumbled during the day, but the real show started after the sun went down. The Ukrainian anti-aircraft guns operated throughout the nights, intercepting at least one or two Russian rockets. It wasn’t safe for the soldiers to stay consecutive days in the same house. The Russians seemed content to occupy ruins.

On the front, you swiftly learn to differentiate between the sound of your own artillery and that of the enemy. After two days, I had mastered this skill. While most shells landed kilometers away from us, if one hit closer, my lack of proper military training would instinctively lead me to throw myself to the ground, always providing the soldiers with a good laugh.

3.

A young boy took me from Kiyiv to Dnipropetrovsk in a camouflage all-terrain vehicle with no license plate. The closer we got to the front in the east, the more checkpoints there were.

The boy would pull up in front of the roadblocks, roll down the window, and shout the latest password, which was sent to the soldiers every day by the Ministry of War. We set out at dawn, and by afternoon we had reached the town. At a gas station, I had to switch cars. They put me in a car driven by two snipers from the 72nd Brigade. I shared the back seat with AKM machine guns and a hand grenade launcher all the way to Donetsk province. No one had to tell us we had reached the front. The continuous roar of the artillery made that clear enough.

For two or three hours, nobody bothered with the foreign correspondent. I took pictures of soldiers trying to fix shot-up SUVs in the yards of the houses they had requisitioned. The sun had already set by the time a soldier in his twenties who

wouldn’t stop grinning came up to me.

“The commander of the Unit, Nazar wants to see you now.”

He took me to a two-story wooden house. The ground floor was full of soldiers eating eggs and chicken with potatoes roasted in their peels. The men were sitting on crates of NLAW anti-tank rockets pushed against the wall. The commander who must have been about fifty, introduced himself, put a plate in my hand and gestured me to sit down and eat.

I had a few bites. There was an uncomfortable silence in the room, and everyone was looking at me.

“So, you are Hungarian?” Nazar asked.

“Yes.”

“I know a Hungarian.”

I felt shivers go down my spine. I sincerely hoped I wouldn’t have to explain Hungarian foreign policy to a bunch of armed men in the middle of the night.

“Yes?”

“The best Hungarian, I think. The most talented. Do you know her name?”

“No.”

“Michelle Wild.”

The men in the room who were over forty laughed. The men in their twenties had no idea what he was talking about.

“She had a big influence on me too,” I said.

“Are you talking about a politician?” asked a twenty-something kid, called Vitya.

“No,” Nazar replied. “Talented actress.”

“How come I never hear of her?” asked Vitya.

“Because by time you were born, she already retired.”

“I could still know her.”

“You don’t know her because you’re homo and you don’t watch porn.”

“Yes I watch porn!”

“But you don’t watch classic porn. Because you’re homo.”

“I’m not a homo!”

“Yes, you are,” Nazar said, bringing the debate to an end.

“So what you come here for, Hungarian?”

“To film.”

“Porn?” the kid asked.

“Yes.”

“Welcome to Ukraine!” Nazar said.

Someone found a bottle of American whiskey, and by the time we had finished it, they had assigned me to Vitya, who would take me to the front.

The war had been going on for eight months, and we all knew that eight months was more than enough time for people in the West to forget that the Russians had invaded a European country. Ukrainian resistance depended on getting military support. The presence of foreign journalists was a necessary evil to secure arms supplies.

4.

I met Petya upon my arrival to the frontline. Nazar assigned me to one of the wooden buildings where his soldiers slept.

When I first stepped into the room with my backpack slung across my back, a huge man with a shaved head was standing in front of me in his underwear and a poison green T-shirt. He looked me up and down:

“I warn you that I snore like chainsaw.”

“It won’t bother me. Actually, makes me feel at home.”

“That’s what my wife says.”

“Does she snore?”

“I don’t know. I never heard her snore.”

“I snore.”

“No problem.”

I unpacked my stuff next to my bed, undressed, and went to bed. I listened to the night noises, the rumble of the cannons in the distance. The branches of the trees were heavy with fruit, and you could hear the wasps and bees buzzing around the rotting apples and pears in the leaves on the ground.

I had trouble falling asleep. Petya was wide awake too—I could tell because there wasn’t a hint of his usual snoring.We lay quietly on our beds for a while.

“Do you have a family?” Petya asked from his bed, breaking the silence.

“A wife and a son from my first marriage. How about you? Do you have any children?”

“Two. Two boys. Eight and twelve years old. Do you want to see picture?”

“Yes.”

Petya stood. Stepping over to my bed, the boards creaking

underneath him, he held up a battered smartphone displaying a picture of two little boys wearing striped T-shirts and enjoying ice cream.

“They are very handsome,” I said. Then I shuddered because a shell had struck maybe a kilometer or two away.

“Do you have picture of your son?”

I took out my phone and brought up a pic of my son.

“He looks just like you.”

“Yeah. Lots of people say I had myself cloned.”

“My babies not look like me, good thing. They like their mother.”

“Lucky for them,” I said with a grin.

“You’re not most handsome man in world either, Sasha.”

5.

During the day, I toured the Ukrainian positions with Vitya and conducted interviews. I grew very fond of the kid very quickly. Once, right before we went to the front, I saw him wrestling on the ground with another soldier. He teased everyone relentlessly, but no one took offense at his rough jokes. Vitya belonged to the generation born into war. War cradled his crib, and armed resistance against the Russians was his first love. He graduated from the war. At the age of twenty-three, he was already considered a veteran among the frontline soldiers. Nazar had instructed that I shouldn’t be sent to the active front until he was confident in my readiness.

About ten kilometers from the front, I interviewed the medics of the battalion or the guys returning in tanks. Several times, I was assigned to kitchen duty. This meant I had to

accompany one of the soldiers and assist him in hunting pheasants at the edges of the wheat fields. The birds were confused by the thunder of the mortar shells, so they would run out to the side of the road, and you could just shoot them. There was always something freshly killed for dinner. During the two weeks I spent at the front, the soldiers shot pheasant for the most part. I managed to bag some wild rabbits once. Everyone was overjoyed that day.

I usually chatted with Petya in the evenings. He was stationed at the Browning machine guns. The Russians would shell the hell out of the Ukrainian positions dug in the ground between the stunted trees and then try to overrun them with infantry. There were more and more unburied bodies in the wheat fields under the October sky.

On the third night, Petya asked if I had a picture of my wife.

“Yes.”

“Show me.”

I showed him one of the pics on my phone. He looked at it for a long time.

“Too Jewish for me.”

“Jewish cunts are warmer, you know.”

“My wife’s cunt is hotter. Want to see picture?”

“Of your wife’s cunt?”

“No, idiot. Of wife.”

“Sure.”

Petya stepped over to my bed and put his phone in my hand. On the screen was a pic of a natural blond, a stunningly beautiful woman.”

“She’s my Tyina,” he said.

“Poor thing, she must be blind.”

“Why you say she is blind?”

“She married you.”

“What do you know about true love?”

“Everything. What the hell does she see in you?”

“I don’t know. We met at May ball of steelwork. She was in bright yellow dress, so beautiful I could not breathe.”

“What did you do to trick her into talking to you?”

“Nothing. I knew her father from factory. He introduced me. It was love at first sight. I dated her one month before she let me hold hand. No one had ever kissed me like.”

“Gimme a tissue so I can wipe away my tears.”

“Her kiss was sweet like honey.”

“You were born to be a poet, Petya, not a soldier.”

“After one year, I married her. The wedding was in Ilovaisk. And then came Petyaka and then little Volodya.”

“You think about them a lot.”

“I do not think about anything else.”

“When was the last time you saw them?”

“Seven months ago.”

“That’s a lot. Do you talk to them often?”

“Yes. Every day.”

6.

In the evenings, Petya talked about his family. He told me what his children's favorite food was, how his wife made it, how they kept bees at his father-in-law's place, twelve hives in all. I'd been among the soldiers for a week when Petya came to dinner one night with a bandage on his hand.

"What happened?"

"It's nothing."

He ate, drank some whisky, and went to bed. I played cards with the others.

"The Russians tried to break through today." – said Vitya when he got bored of the game.

"Did you have to give up the position?"

"Yep. Fifty rounds left in the Browning. Can you imagine?"

"What happened to Petya?"

"He's the only one left alive. A bullet went through his hand. We had to shout to get him to leave the post. He grabbed the gun, just in case."

Petya was already snoring when I got back to the room. I went to bed. I was awakened by his moaning and swearing.

"What happened?"

"I rolled on hand. Stitches are torn, I think."

The bandage was dripping with blood.

"We should go to the hospital."

The hospital was about twenty kilometers away. I knew this, because I wasn't allowed to take any pictures there. Anywhere but there. The Ukrainians wouldn't let us report their losses.

"Fuck it," he said. "Just bandage it up again."

“I’m not a doctor.”

“Just bandage the fucking thing. I will go to hospital in morning.”

“Okay.”

“First aid kit is on vest.”

I unzipped the pouch marked with the white cross and took out the tourniquets. The gauze and iodine were at the bottom. I used the small scissors to cut the bandage on Petya’ hand. The stitches had torn badly. A mix of red and black blood.

“Clean it out.”

I wiped the wound with iodine and even poured a little in it. Petya was constantly cursing. English has a limited number of curse words compared to the Ukrainian language. In any of the Slavic languages, you can continue swearing for hours without repeating yourself. I couldn’t catch everything he said, but it seemed to involve the insertion of pine woods, John Deeres, and umbrellas into the enemy’s private parts. When his wound looked clean enough, I started to bandage it up.

“There you go,” I said. “But you should take better care of yourself. You’ve got your family waiting for you back home.”

“They will have to wait a little longer.”

“There’s no telling how long this war will last.”

“It lasts while it lasts. We will be together in end anyway.”

“I sincerely hope so.”

“You don’t have to hope. We will be together for sure. But not now. I still have some Russians to kill.”

“I hope you get home soon.”

“You are a good man, Sasha.”

7.

While playing cards, Nazar said, “Tomorrow you can take the Hungarian out after the attack has started.” When I asked what attack he was talking about, no one said a word, not surprisingly.

It later turned out that, contrary to expectations, the Ukrainian forces had launched a successful counterattack at Kharkiv.Nazar thought that this would be the perfect opportunity to send me to the front lines and keep me safe at the same time. The offensive would distract the Russians enough to reduce the artillery fire on their positions.

We were cutting across fields of wheat, with the sun shining resplendently in the sky above us, when the Russians started shelling the position we were headed for. Two shells hit right next to our car, and it felt as if someone had pushed my head under water.

Vitya drove the car into the woods, mud splashing on the windshield from the shells. He stopped the car next to the trench where the Browning guys had dug themselves and ordered everyone out. Two other soldiers were in the car; they knelt to the ground and listened, then ran to take cover in the trees, dragging me along.

Dusty earth and mud. The trenches were like something out of a World War I movie. Petya was grinning as he came up from underground.

“Want some coffee?” he asked.

We did. I glanced where the barrels of the Browning machine

guns were pointed. The Russians were less than a kilometer away on the far side. You couldn’t see the dead bodies because of the tall grass, but I knew there were a lot of them lying unburied in the field, because when the wind shifted, it brought with it the sweet smell of decay.

I had a cup of coffee in my hand when I heard the shriek of the mortar shell. I lurched to one side and splattered the whole cup on Vitya.

“That was more than ten meters away,” he said after the mortar struck, and he pulled me up off the ground. I couldn’t control the shaking of my hands.

The biggest problem with modern-day artillery is that you can’t see it at all. The legend that 82mm mortar shells were deliberately designed to whistle before impact is widely held. It’s nonsense, of course. No engineer would design a weapon so that the targets would know before it hit that it was about to strike. Mortar shells whistle because they cut through the air and leave a vacuum behind them.

But you only hear the whistle of the shells that God intended for someone else.

The Ukrainians knew when the Russians were firing missiles. I guess the front was close and they could hear them launching. Though I’m not really sure. I only know that on the way back to the car, Vitya suddenly grabbed me and pulled me down into a hole.

The ground shook. I heard a big crash, then nothing.

When Vitya pulled me to my feet,I was totally lost, didn’t know where to go. He steered me towards the car. My ears felt like they’d exploded, but my eardrums weren’t bleeding. Silence stuck around until we hit the ghost village. When my hearing kicked back in, every explosion made me feel like I was getting zapped by electricity. Trying not to hit the dirt

took some work, but I held up okay unless the hits got too close.

8.

Nazar told me that there was a car leaving for Kiev at eight o’clock, and I would leave the front in it.

The brigade was hard at work. All the equipment had to be moved to a new location because the Russian missiles were getting closer and closer. Old flatbed trucks were rolling down the dirt roads, loaded up with fuel, rocket launchers, and ammunition. They drafted me to lend a hand, so I was lugging boxes too, muttering all the while about how nice it’d be if the Russians could please not fire any fucking rockets for just a little while.

The new headquarters was in a granary. It was a concrete building from the Cold War era, with bullet holes and boarded-up windows. We were still hard at work when a green all-terrain vehicle pulled up in front of the entrance.

“What about you?” I asked Petya.

“I am coming with you.”

“See, I told you you’d make it home,” I said, giving him a slap on the back. “I’m good luck for you.”

There were five of us in the all-terrain, and the trip back was a good twelve hours. Wasn’t exactly first-class. I was longing to get a shower and finally take a shit in a toilet, but most of all just to stretch my legs once we reached Kiev.

But that was out of the question. Nazar and the others insisted that we get a round of drinks.

In the city center, we went to a pub called Gorky's. It was in a cellar, with heavy wooden tables and a bar. We could barely get a seat. I was shocked by the bustle. It felt as if we had arrived in a different country, a country that wasn't being ripped apart by war.

The guys ordered Ukrainian vodka and beer. The waiter brought dried salted fish and five shot glasses.

Nazar filled everyone's glass, and when he was done, he raised his own.

"A toast to those who gave their lives."

He lifted his glass on high, then poured the vodka on the ground and threw the glass on the floor with all his might. The others did exactly the same thing. The place fell dead silent, and everyone looked at us.

"Is there a problem?" Nazar asked the bartender.

"Glory to Ukraine!" the bartender replied.

"Glory to the heroes!" the soldiers said, and everyone in the pub echoed their shout.

New glasses were brought to the table. Nazar filled them.

"And now a toast to the living," he said, and he knocked it back in one gulp.

We drank quickly, and a lot.

"And now," Nazar said after the second bottle of vodka, "we go to see the patriotic whores."

Since the offensive began, downtown brothels gave a 20% discount to frontline fighters due to an 11 PM curfew. Keeping the places afloat and showing patriotic devotion played a part, but "patriotic" became the buzzword.

I was dizzy from alcohol and fatigue. I didn't want to go, but I couldn't get out of it. The whorehouse was in a four-story building. We went on foot. Nazar rang the bell, and the door swung open.

The women were on the fourth floor. Two old, moderately spacious apartments that had been turned into one. There was a big Ukrainian flag on the wall in the hallway. A woman who must have been about fifty and whose cheeks were caked with rouge walked over to us and sat us down on the sofa.

She and Nazar started haggling in Ukrainian. It took me a while to realize that they were arguing about me. I was not a soldier, she was saying, and so I did not get any discount. I cast a glance at Petya, hoping he could get me out of the whole thing, but he was just staring at the wall. Eventually, Nazar must have reached some kind of agreement with the woman, because she walked over to the counter, picked up a bell, and gave it a shake.

The three doors off the hallway swung open, and soon six women were standing in front of us with business smiles on their faces. They were dressed in bras and panties.

"Take your pick," the woman said, and even I understood.

I also understood the silence that fell over us. When it comes to committing a sinful act, no one wants to go first. Several seconds of silence passed, several unbearably awkward seconds.

And then Petya stood up. He had a bleary look in his eyes. He walked over to one of the brunettes, a girl who must have been in her twenties.

"Let's go, sweetheart," he said. She took his hand and led him into the room.

The other two soldiers immediately followed suit, chose a girl, and then left. I stared in shock.

“What?” Nazar asked, lighting a cigarette. “You look like you have seen a ghost.”

“No,” I replied, “I’m just a little surprised. Petya was always talking about his wife. I never would have thought he’d sleep with another woman.”

Nazar took a drag on his cigarette, grimaced a little, stubbed it out in the ashtray, and stood up.

“Petya’s apartment in Kharkiv was hit by a rocket the day after the invasion started,” he said. “His family was killed.”

He then walked over to one of the girls, took her hand, and withdrew with her into one of the rooms.

New Poetry by Sofiia Tiapkina: “To Forget or Not Maybe,” “Grasping the Sky,” and “Airless Embrace”

THE SILENT SKY / *image by Amalie Flynn*

to forget or not maybe

to forget or not maybe
to fight for memory or not

i’m here i’m she
lying on my back underneath me
blue cherries of bruises ten backs
all pierced by bullets all riddled
no one seems to cry here this defenseless death is unshared with any and all
i look around at people all around still people these old trees outside what a spring so wildly
blooms and dies with a scream
i rise from my knees or maybe just
think that i rise i was a teacher
what remains of the school now
walls shrubs suckle blood from the soil
i taught them to never
kill people and now
i’m face to face
with the killers of children hands and face changed the maples turned perfectly crimson too soon
broke my
spine and soul i would tell them if i still taught never kill anyone
i rise from my knees call out to god
god i accept everything i
understand the end of life
i accept it i am desecrated
why do you punish me
with this life
after death

Grasping the Sky

Inside us: a piece of
sky, blue and rusty,
smelling of winter and
gunpowder.
Who will see us as we crawl, chasing

the shadows of the clouds?
She reanimates the land.

The bombs, and bullets, and bodies took
its breath away and send it straight into cardiac arrest.
The scars of war are on her palms and tongue,
but she keeps going because without the land,
her heart will stop, too.

Land—земля—zemlia: a greenplace, a birthgiver, our bread.
She puts her hands around it and tries to close off
the wounds of horror and destruction and
deathdeathdeathdeath
that the inhumans opened with their hungry teeth.
Sometimes, when the blood stops rushing through her ears
or between her fingers,
she hears the echo of “brotherly nations,” “local misunderstanding,”
“child actors.”
The land moans under the weight of
countless bones.

We carry no
prophecies under our skin.

The silent sky
floods our mouths.
Who will hear us climb up
the lifeless mushrooms?

He rebuilds the house.
A new foundation in place of his ancestors’
home built with tears. The missile took
the walls, but the kitchen table is still
standing in the middle.

House—будинок—budynok: a warm place, a safehold, our nest.
He drinks tea at the kitchen table.
One year anniversary,

he feels the explosions
reverberating through his ribs.
His daughter would have turned three.
His wife would have put a pot of
lilacs by her crib.
He drinks tea at the kitchen table of a murdered house.
It’s hot and bitter, and for a minute, he forgets
a new future of new houses with
no one inside.

Everything we wanted
was in the sound
of the sky without
the stench of corpses.
Who will remember us if
the task ahead will take a generation?

They reconstruct their homeland.
Too many questions, too little time: where
do they fit between now and then;
how do they embezzle millions yet fight corruption
as never before; what are dignity and justice and fairness
if the debris of a shelled hospital hide
the broken pieces of mothers and newborns.

Homeland—Батьківщина—Bat’kivschyna: a free place, a seeing glass, our hope.
They won’t live to see it without blood and tears
soaking its black ground. How do they repair machine-gunned hearts?
How do they rebuild a cracked-open sky?
They reconstruct their homeland as the bombs
try to bring them to their knees. Too many
questions, too little time. But the question,
“Will we live?” is not one of them.
Millions of hands breaking the chains
shout the answer louder than
air raid sirens.

Inside us: a whisper
of summer, when sunflowers
grow from the ash.
Who will catch the birds
pecking out a path between
the sky and wheat fields?

No one. Our wings hold the glory of freedom.

airless embrace

i miss you like i miss the sky
cold so painfully blue
angels must have
dripped blueberry juice
from the clouds
i want to tether myself
to the sky-whispers
embrace them bury my
face into their warmth
but it doesn’t make you here
i stalk the shore scooping
up birds beaks
black with blood
you used your skirt
to wipe off the
red from their feathers
why did you
let go
the earth drinks soot
i’m thirsty for
the sound of
your smile
under the winter sun
on the shore
i pick the nightingales

curl my toes to find
the damper sand
the soft homes of crabs below
i hold the memory
of your hair
between my fingers
i miss you
until i fly out of
the soil’s arms
and the sky
catches me
in its thousand
blue hands

Peter Molin’s “Strike Through the Mask!”: American Veterans and the Ukrainian Crisis

Bordentown is a pleasant town located on the New Jersey side of the Delaware River about twenty miles north of Philadelphia. For a small town, Bordentown has seen a fair amount of history and notable residents. Clara Barton lived there for a while, as did Napoleon Bonaparte’s brother Joseph. Most famously, Thomas Paine, the British author and friend to the American and French Revolutions, bought a home in Bordentown in 1782 and lived there on-and-off until his death in 1809. Paine is sometimes called “the father of the American Revolution” for his writing and active support of the American cause. His 1776 pamphlet *Common Sense* stated the American case

against England's King George III clearly and persuasively and so helped galvanize the American will to fight for independence. Later in 1776, another Paine essay, titled "American Crisis" contained the famous words:

These are the times that try men's souls: The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman.

I don't live far from Bordentown, and occasionally visit it in the course of daily life. So it was on a Sunday afternoon this past February that I arrived in town to find the downtown square packed with people assembled to honor the memory of Peter Reed, a Bordentown native and former Marine who had recently been killed in Ukraine aiding the resistance against the Russian invasion. I had read of Reed's death earlier in the week, but had not noted the Bordentown connection. Given my own sympathy for Ukraine and interest in the lives of veterans, it seemed a fortuitous coincidence, or even a matter of fate, that I happened upon the ceremony held in Reed's honor.

From the spoken remarks, it was clear that Reed was well-liked and admired, and also a guy cut from a different cloth. Speakers remembered Reed fondly as a good guy, but also something of a joker. One story was that he had streaked through the new local high school in the days before it opened, christening it in his way to the delight of friends who cheered him on. Another speaker told of how Reed had filled her car interior with wadded-up newspapers in a friendly show of prankster one-upmanship. Every speaker noted Reed's desire for adventure, to help, and to serve—impulses revealed in service in the Marines as a medic and culminating in stints as an NGO providing medical aid in Mosul and then in Ukraine. This impression is corroborated by a reminiscence published in the Guardian by an author who had worked with Reed in Mosul helping fight ISIS: "Pete was one of the most

selfless people I've ever met. You should know a bit about the good he did in this world."

While I listened to the speakers at Peter Reed's memorial, I did not hear mention of Thomas Paine. Maybe I missed it. Maybe the speakers thought it a stretch to invoke his name in connection with Reed's sacrifice on behalf of Ukraine, or they didn't know how. For myself, I greatly admire Paine in his time as a man who combined striking writing ability, political acumen and righteousness, and courageous service in the field. As I listened to the speakers in Bordentown, I came to admire Reed in his time as a man who, like Paine, was possessed by an unwavering sympathy for people fighting against tyrannical government.

Reed, as far as I know, was not a man of the pen, as was Paine, but he was just one of a number of American military veterans who have volunteered to fight on the side of Ukraine. Early on, the most prominent of these has been James Vazquez, a former Marine whose Twitter dispatches from the frontlines described in vivid detail the action and emotional caliber of the war. No doubt Vazquez's model inspired other vets to volunteer, either through admiration or envy.

But more recently, Vazquez's claims to prior combat experience have been discredited, and doubt has been cast on the verity of his reportage from Ukraine. Unfortunately, other articles have also portrayed some American vets in Ukraine as thrill-seekers, or as not having much to offer, as seeking profit, or as having little stomach for the long fight. Several veterans and the organizations with which they are affiliated have become ensnared in legal and financial turbulence that besmirch the good names of the participants and which suggest their utility, even at best, has been marginal.

Such articles are necessary, for the complete picture is important to understand. But in our overheated political times, they also seem motivated by an instinct to discredit

the Ukrainian cause and undermine support for it in America. From my vantage point as chronicler of Iraq and Afghanistan literature, art, and movies, I've been most intrigued by the accounts of Ukraine written by veterans of the GWOT art-and-literary scene. My sense that these men (all men that I know of, so far) have much to offer in terms of insight and expertise and possess the capacity to write shrewdly and in-detail about their experiences. In short, I trust them—not that their ideas are conclusive, but that their words are sturdy start-points from which my own thoughts develop.

Three writers in particular have published long trenchant articles that weigh their observations about American vets in Ukraine in light of their own war-and-military experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan: Elliot Ackerman, Luke Mogelson, and Matt Gallagher. Another, Adrian Bonenberger, the founder of *The Wrath-Bearing Tree*, has spoken at length about support for Ukraine on a recent podcast.

Ackerman, a former Marine and now a novelist and journalist, has written frequently about Ukraine for high-profile media outlets such as *The Atlantic* and *Time*. Ackerman's articles often address policy and strategy, but my favorites have been those that describe scenes and people. Ackerman's portrait of soldiers already in the fight or moving to the fight, refracted through his own thoughts about the allure of war, are brooding and evocative, never more so than in an article published in the literary journal *Sewanee Review* titled "Four Letters from Ukraine." The passage below renders Ackerman's talent for scene-setting:

The driver nodded glumly. We piled our bags in his trunk, and he sped us through town to the hotel I'd booked on Expedia a week before. It never ceases to amaze me that you can e-book your rooms in a war zone. Wars can often feel to me like distant, far-off things, even though I have experience writing about them and fighting in them. With a war I've never seen, I usually feel this distance. The stream of headlines, the

assault of images—it commodifies war, condenses it into a packageable story. When I feel that distance—whether I'm planning to head to that war or not—I'll often pull out my phone and see what it would take to get to the front line. In nearly every instance, I discover I could arrive at the war with a place to stay within twenty-four hours. And suddenly, the war feels closer.

Later, Ackerman ruminates directly about the international volunteers he meets in Ukraine:

The effort to rally foreign fighters to Ukraine seems to suffer from an adverse selection problem. Although many are sympathetic to Ukraine's cause, a person must place their life on hold to fight. Typically, this means a person can't have much of a life to begin with. If you have a job, or a family, or myriad other adult commitments, it is likely you can't drop everything and go to Ukraine for an indeterminate amount of time. If you don't have any of these commitments, it might be for a reason, and perhaps these folks … aren't the best raw material from which to forge an international legion.

Luke Mogelson is not a vet, but a journalist and fiction-author who often writes about war-related and veteran subjects. His short-story collection *These Heroic, Happy Dead* is one of my favorite collections of GWOT-themed fiction. Even better, his *New Yorker* account of Kurdish fighters in Mosul served as the basis for my favorite post-9/11 war film so far, *Mosul*. Last year, Mogelson traveled to Ukraine to take stock of the international fighters fighting on Ukraine's behalf. A passage from his *New Yorker* article "Trapped in the Trenches in Ukraine" describes the best and the worst of the new arrivals:

Of the hundreds of foreigners who had been at the facility when it was hit, many had returned to Poland. According to my Canadian friend, this was for the best. Although some of the men had been "legit, values-driven, warrior-mentality"

veterans, others were "shit": "gun nuts," "right-wing bikers," "ex-cops who are three hundred pounds." Two people had accidentally discharged their weapons inside his tent in less than a week. A "chaotic" lack of discipline had been exacerbated by "a fair amount of cocaine."

The [recent] attack functioned as a filter….

As the article proceeds, Mogelson describes members of the Ukrainian military International Legion in action on the front-line, to include the precarious experience of trench warfare. At the article's close, he balances the sense of purpose that animates vets to volunteer in Ukraine against the lack of purpose many veterans felt in Iraq and Afghanistan. One vet in particular impresses him:

More than any other foreign volunteer I met, Doc seemed to be genuinely motivated by a conviction that the conflict was "a clear case of right and wrong." I sometimes wondered to what extent his desire to participate in such an unambiguously just war was connected to his previous military career….

Expanding on that last sentence, Mogelson juxtaposes service in Ukraine with the tenuous displays of gratitude veterans received from Americans for fighting in the Global War on Terror:

I also suspected another appeal in Ukraine for International Legion members. During my lunch with Doc on Andriyivsky Descent, in October, I'd been unexpectedly moved when the old man in the fedora thanked him for his service. I shared Doc's discomfort with similar gestures Stateside, but something here was different. Although the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan were transformative for those who fought in them, they had no real impact on most Americans and Europeans. Everyone in Ukraine, by contrast, has been affected by the Russian invasion; everyone has sacrificed and suffered. For some foreign veterans, such a country, so thoroughly reshaped and

haunted by war, must feel less alien than home.

Iraq veteran Matt Gallagher and author of the novels *Youngblood* and *Empire City* has published two long articles in *Esquire* about his trips to Ukraine. The first describes a quixotic venture in the company of fellow vet-writers Adrian Bonenberger and Benjamin Busch to train rear-guard Ukrainians in basic infantry skills and tactics. Gallagher possesses the sardonic, anti-authoritarian streak of a humorist, but in this piece the instinct for comic appraisal bumps up against his desire to help and belief in a cause that was no joke whatsoever for the Ukrainians he was training:

Then that lawyer does it again, and again, and again, and then, all at once, he's capable. Because he must be. Every woman and man there said they'll defend their homes if the war comes to western Ukraine. I pray it doesn't, but they'll be ready if those pleas go unheard. During our two weeks together, they gave our group their trust, their commitment. It's a heavy thing, to pick up a gun in war. The choice, if it does come, belongs to them alone.

Gallagher's sentiments made me think of Thomas Paine's words from "American Crisis":

He who is the author of a war lets loose the whole contagion of hell and opens a vein that bleeds a nation to death.

Gallagher's second piece more directly explores the motives and behavior of American and other international veterans fighting in Ukraine. The article is buried behind a paywall, so you'll have to accept my summary of it, but the title hints at the ambiguities Gallagher discovered: "The Secret Weapons of Ukraine: A Journey Through the Strange, Semiprofessional World of Volunteers and Foreign Fighters Who, One Year Into Russia's Invasion, Are Risking Everything to Defeat the Invaders." Not everything Gallagher describes is reassuring; several volunteers are obviously opportunistic and less than

well-behaved. Gallagher is a fervent believer in the Ukraine cause, so he doesn't throw the let's-just-say "colorful" volunteers under the bus. But he's a shrewd observer of the veteran-scene in America, and he doesn't miss that that some of the same dynamics that have driven some American GWOT vets to folly have reemerged in the overseas fighting community:

Everyone's story is different. Everyone's story is a little the same. Certain traits and patterns recur as we meet more volunteers. Most are men, but not all. Many of the younger ones served [in the US military] at the tail end of the war on terror and didn't get the combat experience they'd anticipated or perhaps wanted. Some of the older ones sold their businesses and homes to sustain their work. More than a few are living off military retirement and disability checks. I stop tallying the number of divorces and separations.

Taking stock of this ambivalent portrait, Gallagher lands of the side of the glass being half-full:

One can view this as a bit sad, even pathetic. Or one can regard their coming to Ukraine as an act of courage. Here they are, in another war zone, trying to pay it forward to others, because they believe they still have something to give.

The aforementioned Adrian Bonenberger is a US Army veteran of two tours in Afghanistan and the author of a memoir and short-story collection, as well as the founder of *The Wrath-Bearing Tree*. Bonenberger's wife is Ukrainian, and he has been in-and-out of Ukraine many times over the past decade. As I write, he is back in Ukraine and serving in the Ukrainian military as an advisor. Though he has not yet written at length about his endeavors, we await the time when he does, for it surely will be interesting. In the meantime, a podcast with Paul Rieckhoff offers insight into his motivations and actions. Speaking of his work helping Ukraine prepare for a spring offensive, he states, "Helping them get ready for the offensive was probably going to be the single most useful thing I could do as a

democratic citizen, a citizen of the US, a citizen of the democratic world, of the civilized world."

Later in the podcast Bonenberger explains, "The United Sates invested seven years of time in me. I went to Ranger School, to Long Range Reconnaissance School. I was a platoon leader and executive officer in the 173rd Airborne Brigade. I was an [operations] officer and company commander in 10th Mountain Division. I knew what I had to offer to the Ukrainians…."

How to read Thomas Paine's belief and support for America in light of American veterans fighting today in Ukraine? Is the connection specious? Is it meaningful? Perhaps it's best not to make too much of it. None of the veteran-authors I've described above made 1/100th the impact of Paine in his time, even measured collectively, and the same might be said for the international fighters they describe. Paine's life was not without complication and controversy, both during the American Revolution and afterwards. Today, he is as likely to be as invoked by the right as by the left as an ideological forebear to contemporary political currents. Roughly stated, conservatives view Paine as a fierce critic of overbearing state authority, contra the more popular understanding of him as an apostle of democracy.

Be all that as it may, given the force with which Paine met the demands of the 1776 moment, less savory particulars and after-events seem secondary. My own thought is that anyone who volunteers to get anywhere close to a war-zone has less regard for convention, propriety, and personal safety than most. For Ukraine to defeat Russia now requires men and women of action first, with talent important, and idealism and commitment factored into the equation in uneven doses.

Also important is the war-of-words that place events in context while guiding readers' thoughts to the fullest appreciation of circumstances. At Peter Reed's memorial

ceremony in Bordentown, after friends and family members spoke, a representative from a local Ukrainian Church took the podium. Though not an official emissary, the man spoke with authority and gravitas. “I know the war in Ukraine is a distant one for many Americans, but for us it is life or death. Peter Reed’s death fighting for Ukrainian freedom may be difficult for you to understand, but to every Ukrainian he is a hero. Thank you for sending him to us. We know you will never forget him, and neither will we.”

Later, re-reading Paine, the Ukrainian’s words seemed reflected in this “American Crisis” passage:

It is not a field of a few acres of ground, but a cause, that we are defending, and whether we defeat the enemy in one battle, or by degrees, the consequences will be the same.

Works quoted in this article:

Elliot Ackerman, “Four Letters from Ukraine.” *Sewanee Review*, Fall 2022.

Adrian Bonenberger, *Independent Americans with Paul Rieckhoff* podcast. Episode 220, May 2023.

Matt Gallagher, “Notes from Lviv.” *Esquire*, March 2022.

Matt Gallagher, “The Secret Weapons of Ukraine.” *Esquire*, February 2023.

Luke Mogelson, “Trapped in the Trenches in Ukraine.” *The New Yorker*, December 2022.

Cengiz Yar, “My Friend Pete Reed was Killed as He Saved Lives in Ukraine. You Should Know the Good He Did.” *The Guardian*, February 2023.

Thomas Paine's writings are easy to find on-line. I also found the following two biographies helpful in understanding his life, work, and times:

Edward G. Gray, *Tom Paine's Iron Bridge: Building a United States*. Norton, 2016.

Harlow G. Unger, *Thomas Paine and the Clarion Call for American Independence*. DeCapo, 2019.

New Fiction from Adrian Bonenberger: "American Fapper 2: Still Fappin'"

I know what you're thinking. What could this story possibly be about. Let me catch you up.

First of all, you're wondering whether I shot Angela's kid or Angela. The answer is: I shot neither. I shot a jihadist who spotted me. The next half hour was a blur of sniping, shooting, and explosions. Here's how it ended: me bursting into Angela's room and disarming her. I don't remember many details about what happened to get me there, but I remember quite clearly what happened when I entered her bedroom. She tried to shoot me with her AK, it missed, and I wrenched it out of her hands. She tried to attack me with her fists, and I held her by her arms.

“Angela, it’s me,” I said, pausing her furious assault, but sparking no recognition in her blue eyes. I removed my helmet like Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars*. “It’s your neighbor, from high school. I’m here to rescue you.”

In fact I had been sent there to kill her, but the plan changed. You’ll be happy to know that I made her my wife, and adopted her kids (we weren’t able to find her jihadist husband, I heard he joined up with ISIS later, after Angela became my girl). Now they’re at Choate, and me and Angela have a couple kids of our own.

Big changes, huh!

This story isn’t about Iraq, though—not the parts from the first story, or the parts from when I went back to do more sniping in Mosul in 2017. It’s not about my happy marriage to Angela either, though that’s somewhat relevant. No, this story is about what happened when, after a long and illustrious career, having just retired, through a strange series of coincidences and serendipitous happenings I found myself in Ukraine, fighting against Russia’s wicked and immoral invasion.

In Ukraine, where I encountered the greatest test of my life—one that nearly ended me, and from which I emerged triumphant only by the barest of margins.

***

How to set the stage for Ukraine better than to explain that my heroic rescue of Angela from the clutches of evil jihadists wrought in me a profound and lasting change? A change that, given what you already know of my sniping aptitude, probably won’t be all that surprising… that’s right: after marrying Angela, it was no longer necessary for me to jack it before killing some bad guy or another.

Throughout the various places I was deployed with the Navy

SEALs and then later Delta, Special Activities Detachment (SAD) and a Task Force that occasionally pulled me up for off the books black ops missions, I did not fap once during a mission. People in those units already knew me as the "American Fapper" owing both to the fame of my story (with which you're likely familiar) and my unimpeachable combat record. But as is so often the case with fame and the things that bring people notoriety I had already moved on… I was no longer "fapping," nor did Angela's prodigious sexual appetite leave me much energy for anything beyond recuperation. I would look forward to two- or three-month deployments as only these were able to give me the time and space to adequately restock the vital energy I needed to do the level of sex Angela required to a standard that I felt was acceptable.

It got to the point where I could barely even remember the person who'd needed to rub one out before achieving the quiet clarity required to make a 900m headshot kill without flinching. Who was he? What odd neuroses consumed him? It was like thinking about a fictional character or trying to recollect the optimism and enthusiasm of a Christmas morning during childhood.

Countless missions later, I'd been promoted and aged out of combat operations. Angela didn't mind and neither did I. Closing in on retirement with two bad knees and a broken down back, the desk job I had once regarded with revulsion and fear came to represent a goal. Nothing pleased me more than to think about quietly retiring to my hometown to teach history or maybe join the police force. As I remembered, and observed during trips back, the sleepy town was ideal for older people to wind down their final days.

The pent up and volcanic energies of my youth, satiated and slacked by the accomplishments of my adulthood, no longer compelled in me a reckless gallop for the unknown. I was admired within my company of peers, and that group was (who could disagree?) objectively a company of heroes.

This is all to say, nothing artificial pushed me to Ukraine; it was not an escape or a restlessness. The circumstances of my life were pleasant, comfortable, and satisfying. I was perfectly content.

Then Putin invaded.

***

In 2014 I'd done a training hitch in what Ukrainians call "polygon," the name for a training area, somewhere in its north. It was an off the books rotation, I'd taught a strange crew of old and young men how to do sniper activities. I'd done training missions before all over the Middle East but could honestly say I'd never had a group ingest my lessons so quickly or completely. In fact, one of the older soldiers, a 55-year-old man named Yura who'd been in Afghanistan with the Red Army, taught *me* a couple tricks about concealment that stood me in good stead. That hadn't happened in a long time; I considered him a master sniper and a peer, though his rank was that of a regular sergeant. Their promotion system was a little wacky.

My time in Ukraine gave me a sense that this was a serious people, and I never completely forgot about them, especially as they fought against the Russians over the next years. Occasionally I'd get a note from one of them, inquiring about my health or sending an update after a particularly fierce battle. My training of them seemed to have a profound impact on their development and confidence and I tried to offer them support and conversation as I could.

One of the updates, in 2019, came from Yura's wife; Yura, it seemed, had been seriously wounded in an artillery strike in a town called Avdiivka. She related the details of his injury – the loss of his left (non-shooting) arm – asking for small monetary assistance and I thought, not for the first time and not for the last time, how different a war like his was.

Getting injured or killed by a battery of Russian 300m rocket artillery pieces was never a conceivable end for me. Shot by the Taliban or AQ or ISIS, maybe, but a bomb or rockets? Forget it.

The Ukrainians were in the kind of war I'd only ever imagined or watched on TV. Even the battles for Mosul paled in comparison. I thought about this, and wondered at their ability to keep fighting against the Russians. We wired him $1000 which his family said was a godsend. Several months after his injury and with the help of a prosthetic, Yura was back in uniform and carrying his trusty Dragonuv rifle.

I thought about that, too.

***

There had been a foul energy building in the world. A bad moon. Even so, when Russia invaded, I was surprised. I didn't think things like that could happen anymore.

Angela's parents, who admired me (especially her father), were nonetheless owing to their German roots somewhat skeptical of Ukraine, and I would even go so far as to say passively pro-Russian. At least in the sense that they'd totally written off Ukraine once Russian tanks crossed the border.

This prejudice against Ukraine and for Russia was deep-seated with them. Angela's grandfathers had both fought in WWII and I think after Germany's defeat were inclined to view the Russians and Soviets both as horrible and paradoxically also at the same time superior to Germans – the Russians had proved this on the battlefield. To resist or defeat the Russians was seen somehow as impossible, or not worth the cost.

They swore (Angela's father, and her mother supported him in this) that Russia would have the whole of Ukraine in two weeks. I told them as respectfully as I could that the Ukrainians would fight, knowing the people I trained, and

fight they did; bravely, honorably, and against all odds, successfully. The invasion was parried in the north and south, then pushed back. In the east, however, it turned into a brutal shoving match. Mariupol and Melitopel were lost. The war itself darkened.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. The first weeks of the war the Ruhrs went from seeing things their way, to seeing them my way. I shared photos that Ukrainian friends sent. Then I shared photos that friends of mine, folks who'd retired or gotten out years ago, started taking. They'd gone over to join the International Legion or volunteer. very quickly, some of them stopped coming back, either committed to the fight or dead somewhere.

Those photos and the stories you probably all saw in the media had a dramatic impact on me. Simple and humble men, good people, standing up to what everyone knew was certain death and winning, making death itself uncertain. Defeating the bullet, the red horde, standing up to it chest to chest and stopping it cold.

It got so I couldn't stop thinking about it, and then thinking about going over to do something, to help. I cleared it with Angela, who wasn't thrilled, but who basically understood, and I reached out to Yura, who was serving in the Azov Battalion. He got back the same day. "Come on over," he said on Facebook.

***

I probably should say a few words about Azov. You read about them in the news and in Russian propaganda where everyone in Azov is supposed to be a Nazi. I can't say how things were in the past; the symbol they use looks like SS lightning bolts, and everyone there (Yura included) just about admitted that the unit was founded as a neo-Nazi paramilitary (funded, somewhat confusingly, by Kolomioski, a Jewish oligarch) in 2014. But times change. By the time I got to Azov, in March of

2022, it was a top-tier volunteer unit in the national guard, composed of experienced veterans and motivated volunteers. Maybe something analogous to the US Army Rangers. They took their tasks seriously and had obviously trained and prepared for the fight that was unfolding around them in Mariupol. Nobody was “far right” in the sense that Russia or pro-Russians in the west attributed to them. That was all old-guard Azov; people whose influence in the unit was to tell stories about 2014 (and those stories were quickly eclipsed by the actions of 2022 and 2023).

Why didn’t I go into the international legion? This is an excellent question. Mostly, I had no sense of what it was as an organization. If the Ukrainians had found a man to lead it, that might have been one thing. Certainly there were individuals – Westerners – who were suitable for the job, and had reputations that might have imprinted discipline and unity on the organization. But these individuals were never recruited – nor, as I understand it, even asked – who’s to say whether a Petraeus or McChrystal would have even said “yes” to such an uncertain proposition? In any case, the organization was shrouded in opacity and mystery. As a SEAL, I instinctively mistrusted such an organization…

How did I get to Azov? By helicopter. Things weren’t as difficult as they’d get in April, but it was still pretty tight. I flew to Bucharest in Romania, crossed the border, took a car to Odesa, and from there, hopped a series of cars to a point that was still contested across the Dnipro, where two MI-8s were loaded with ammo and personnel. Mine had a Soviet-era camouflage paint job, and flew low, below treetop for much of the journey, until at night we reached the city and our drop-off point.

These flights were extremely risky, though I happened to be lucky; neither of the helicopters on my flight were shot down or even received much harassing fire. In the very early days, Russian soldiers hadn’t learned to shoot at everything, and

owing to their local air superiority, they assumed our helicopters (the same model as their own) were Russian, though that changed later. The pilots were, like so many Ukrainians, veterans of many conflicts and much combat. The pilot on my helicopter was, like Yura, a veteran of Afghanistan, and had also been employed as a contractor in Iraq, in 2007. Small world, I thought.

Disembarking from the helicopter, my knees and back groaning after the ride, I helped unload the ammo and equipment quickly, then loaded five casualties aboard– everything was done with great urgency for reasons that would soon become apparent – and two English-speaking soldiers hustled me into a basement as the helicopters took off. The entire operation from landing to liftoff took less than five minutes.

Five minutes after that, artillery came crashing down around us, plastering the courtyard and the surrounding buildings with 152mm shells. It was a storm the likes of which I had never before endured, and it lasted for almost 15 minutes straight. They must have put an entire battery to the task of destroying the helicopters; sadly for them, the Mi-8s were long gone.

This was it, I thought as the dust settled. Real war; the kind I'd always imagined. Not gun battles, the likes of which I and my special operations comrades had touched during the invasion of Iraq, and encountered sporadically since. No–this was authentically and unarguably war, Mars walking up and down streets in BTRs and tanks, swinging his red sword and laughing joyously as it struck business, apartment, car, soldier, and child alike. It was chaos.

For a moment, during the artillery barrage, I had even experienced something I never expected to encounter – concern. Had I made a mistake, coming here? Would I ever leave alive?

Using my American optimism and iron Will, I easily shook off

that morbid thought. These were Russians, not supermen. They had advantages in personnel and equipment, but who knew better the price and blind spots of pride better than a Navy SEAL… those vulnerable areas were things I could exploit as easily as shaving errant hairs from my face in the mirror.

The soldiers brought me to Yura that night. I was equipped with a sniper rifle taken from a dead Chechen, one of Khadyrov's henchmen (Azov had ambushed him in broad daylight as he walked down the street with a squad of his soldiers), and given the four magazines of ammo they had for it, totaling 120 rounds. "Make each bullet count and look out for Chechen snipers," Yura said, shaking my hand with his good hand.

"I will," I said, though this was unnecessary.

Yura made a jerking off motion, then winked. "American jerker," he said. "The best."

"Number one," I said. The nickname didn't bother me, and I didn't bother to correct him – it was Fapper, not jerker, or masturbator, both of which I had heard. Getting hung up on that particular always felt like a waste of time, for one thing, and for another, appearing to care about anything usually produced the opposite result from which one hoped, in the military.

I chatted with Yura and his boss, and got a basic sense for the AO. We hammered out a plan for where I could operate, and how to get in touch with Azov if I got cut off (as I planned and hoped to do – one does one's best sniping behind enemy lines). They gave me a manageably light ruck with a couple days of food and water that I would replenish during my forays through the city, warned me again about the threat of Chechen snipers, I grabbed a few hours of sleep, and set out into the early morning before sunup.

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Mariupol – what to say about the city. People told me after I returned home that it was a formerly Greek, and this was true up to a point. The city was built on the site of an Ancient Greek colony, but the modern city was a much more recent phenomenon – and attempts to "Hellenize" its identity, similar to attempts to retroactively Hellenize other parts of Ukraine in Crimea and on the Black Sea were inventions by Catherine the Great and other Russian leaders hoping to connect their nation's history more firmly to posterity.

What I saw in Mariupol was a shattered city; nothing of Greece, or anything beyond pro-Ukrainian spirit among the residents, a desire for peace, and a lot of Russian targets dancing through rubble.

Yura had explained to me how the Russians would attack, and I figured out pretty quickly a solid plan for taking as many of them as I could. First, I'd set up a position adjacent to where I knew there would be a firefight, but offset by 150-200m, preferably with a nice bit of stand-off from streets directly adjacent to the fight. When Russian soldiers popped up, I'd track one, and as soon as the shooting started I'd shoot, my fire masked by a machinegun or tank, then retreat from my wall or apartment or window or rooftop. I'd say my hit rate was around 100%; I can't say for sure about the wounded / kill rate, body armor or helmets might have cheated my bullets, but as I understood from media coverage afterwards the Russians provided very little field medicine to their soldiers during that stage of the invasion, and even a relatively minor wound could result in a kill. In this fashion I was able to hit about 10 soldiers a day without taking any fire.

For about a week I was able to keep this up, old and battered as my poor body was, and in my head I started to think that I was probably informally closing in on Chris Kyle's mark. As we were working, though, we were also falling back – always retreating – the noose slowly closing around our neck. It

dawned on me that, American and rather notorious in certain circles as I was, doubly so as a sniper, my odds of surviving captivity were pretty slim – and the means by which they'd dispatch me were almost certain to be unpleasant.

Block by block, house by house we fought, and at some point during that second week, the Russians seemed to figure out that I was there. Maybe a prisoner talked, maybe I had worked enough squads that folks sort of figured out the routine. I suppose it was inevitable. Still, not knowing bothered me; I wasn't sure what I'd done wrong, so I could correct it in the future.

By then I'd shot (again, I want to be careful to caveat that I never stuck around long enough to see the result) nearly 100 Russian soldiers, and going by the killed/wounded ratio my guess is that at least 50 of those had been kills. But I really can't say for sure.

Some of the kills I'd seen – the Chechen fighters Kaderov sent didn't always like to wear helmets for some reason, and I headshotted about a dozen of them – those, I know I killed. There was something familiar and comfortable about those kills; I suppose the targets reminded me of Taliban or ISIS, with their beards, and swaggering overconfidence. I didn't headshot many of the regular Russian soldiers. Most were wearing helmets, and even a lousy steel WWII era helmet can deflect a bullet at the right angle. Russian soldiers I tried to killshot to the gut, I suspect with some effectiveness.

I noticed that *they* had noticed me, or were aware of my presence, when near the end of the second week, squads began scanning windows and rooftops before charging into an area. It could be I suppose that they had encountered snipers in other, different locations – that it had nothing to do with me, personally. But there they were, looking – seeking. And where soldiers look and seek, where they take precautions, one can be sure, there are other snipers lurking – Chechen or Russian.

***

My numbers fell – I had to change my standard operating procedure. I needed the break, anyway, my body had unlocked new ways of experiencing fatigue and pain. Now I wasn't plinking soldiers or officers – I was in counter-sniper mode. By any reasonable measure my work in this department was exceptional; as soon as I started looking, I found the new or unseasoned or experienced but not battle-tested snipers in their usual spots, and was able to take them out using precisely the same trick that I'd used to shoot soldiers. The snipers I knew that I killed, as everyone was headshotted while they looked for me, or someone like me. One. Two. Six, I tallied them all.

It took me about a week to kill 10 snipers, and by then, I felt a kind of confidence that's difficult to describe. I knew – the way one knows that a table is a table or a tree is a tree – that I was the best sniper in the city; something like a master of the place. Nobody else in the city could do what I was doing. Furthermore, nobody could, now; the opportunity had come and gone, the low hanging fruit was almost all gathered, picked up from the grass with the minimum necessary effort.

The Russians moved in my area only with great caution, perhaps with something bordering on terror. Many people believe that the word terror is synonymous with horror, but this is not the case… horror is a type of extreme fear, whereas terror is spiritual or religious, the state one enters when confronted by the divine. People would peer and creep where before they had run. Snipers were rarely seen at all; more often, what would happen now was tanks or APCs would spray the windows of upper floors whether fire was coming from them or not. Artillery fire and rocket artillery fire was applied liberally on similar logic. The Russians and Chechens had encountered mortality – death, in the form of my steady hand – and they did what they could to destroy instead of fighting the war

incompetently, as they had before. Rather than evolve as an army, they devolved – they were little better than heavily armed gangsters with artillery.

Even under these conditions I was still able to work. I tripled my precautions and began hunting, firing opportunistically and with as little rhyme or reason as I could muster, like a serial killer throwing detectives off his scent. In this way I was also able to replenish my ammunition somewhat, which was down to critical levels. One day I took the uniform from a Russian soldier and infiltrated far into the city, taking a terrible risk (I spoke no Russian or Ukrainian) until I found a headquarters, then crawled in the window of a former bank, walked and lifted myself up a set of stairs, my worn muscles afire with exertion, and (finally) set up in a room across from an emergency exit that fed out onto the roof of an adjacent building. I waited until someone important appeared, canoed him, then made good my escape as the HQ erupted in gunfire and confusion.

This audacious act (one of many) was, though I did not realize it at the time, to create the conditions by which I would encounter my greatest test of all. Jogging along my escape route, all I could think of was the surprised expression on the large, bulldog-faced man – colonel? General? - who had until he met my bullet been under the mistaken impression that he commanded a unit, a group of men, a space in which his authority was absolute.

***

This very lesson was nearly imparted on me scarcely a day later. Our defensive perimeter was shrinking by the day, collapsing onto the massive Azovstal factory-fortress where Azov regiment and many Ukrainian marines would make a last stand. Almost as soon as Russia invaded again, Azov had begun preparing the factory as a redoubt of last hope, stockpiling food, water, ammunition, and everything necessary to withstand

a siege.

Between the factory and the city was a fetid swamp, which as the ground rose to the north, turned into a ghetto or shantytown. Then, more substantial buildings emerged, and one could say that the city itself began, atop the ridge line. We held that, and about a half a kilometer further.

Ill omens had arrived as the sun rose; a murder of crows had flown overhead as I moved toward my sector, the zipper on my jacket got stuck halfway and I realized I'd need to discard it, and "Yankee sniper go home" had been spray painted overnight on the wall of a prominent building. With a start, I realized that it was the 15th; the Ides of March. When I reached the line of contact to set up a position, struggling to move a table into place quietly, one of the two magazines I had remaining slipped out of its pouch and onto the floor. My pouches were customized for my rifle's magazines, and the narrower Soviet-era magazines used by the Russians and Chechens were an imperfect fit, which drove me crazy.

In this case the accident was serendipitous… the magazine slipped out of the pouch, and as I bent to retrieve it the concrete wall where my head had been an instant earlier sprouted a deep divot.

I'd been fired upon; a sniper – a talented sniper – had me zeroed in. I grabbed my rifle from the table and knocked the table over for concealment, pocketed the magazine, and made my retreat; another two bullets punched through table behind me as I left the room, scrambling on my hands and knees and barely avoiding an ass full of splinters or bullets.

I didn't stop in the hall; I made for the staircase and engaged my evacuation route immediately. Just as I exited the building, it erupted – a tank had begun pummeling any room I could be in. I went through a couple buildings and paused, then moved to the first floor of an abandoned house to take

stock and recuperate, gulping in air like a drowning man, ragged with adrenaline and vitality.

When I checked my gear, I saw that there was a bullet hole in the collar of my uniform's jacket. That's how close it had been. Sheer luck, and I'd made it out alive.

My first rational thought, examining the situation calmly, is that the sniper had been waiting for me. That was the only explanation. They'd set up to catch a sniper, and I was the sniper to catch. So they'd tried to kill me, personally.

It felt personal, anyway.

Three choices confronted me. One: chalk it up to coincidence and go back to work – work that still urgently needed to be done. Or two: go into emergency protocol, and hunt this specific sniper. Three involved telling Yura I was done, but I wasn't ready for that. No, now something needed doing, and a head needed taking.

***

I'd been tracking snipers and taking them out for nearly a week, but this was different. A high-level sniper – elite, certainly. They'd laid a trap for me, and sheer chance had robbed them of the kill. I had to acknowledge that before anything else. By all rights I should have been dead. God had preserved me for some other purpose, though I had no idea what that purpose could be.

I made a quick survey of the area and calculated what would be necessary to spring my own trap. First I'd need this person to think that I was taking the first course of action. Leaving was leaving – staying was staying. I'd have to gamble that the sniper I was fighting – a Chechen? Had to be – would both feel cheated by fate, and suppose that I was the type of proud person who'd go out for revenge and/or ignore the incident as bad luck. Besides, we had to protect our territory. Just that

day we'd lost an entire block to the Russian forces to our west.

This gave me a day, three streets or so, worth of houses to make my move. I'd have to get as high as I could without going onto a rooftop (where drones could spot me), but not so high that tanks would bring me under fire before I could find the sniper stalking me. I'd have to predict the rate of advance of the Russians, and also predict how the sniper would predict my own movements. There was a lot of guessing involved. I've never played chess, but this felt a lot like it. I felt like both a King. Or a Queen. Or both. You get the point.

Over the next several hours I scoured our territory looking for the perfect place to spring my plan. Nothing seemed adequate – where my room was good, there was no suitable place for an opposing sniper. Where my enemy had excellent fields of fire (like those he'd encountered in Iraq or Afghanistan or Syria, I assumed, trying to get into his head) there was no good place for me to establish my counter-position.

Just as I was ready to give up, I found the position that made perfect sense. It was 1500, and I had plenty of time to prepare a fake position using a mannequin, watching over a likely sniper location *but not* the location an expert would take – this was the bait.

I clothed my doppelgänger with my uniform and rifle – everything needed to be the same – and concealed them. Yura had brought up another sniper rifle (sadly there were more rifles, now, than people to use them), an old M14, one with which I was familiar owing to time spent deploying to assist the Army earlier in my career. As the fighting around us raged I zeroed the rifle and made sure that its optics worked. Actually, it felt great in my hands – brought back memories of a younger me, one who had their entire future ahead of them. A me who never could have imagined that one day I'd end up with Angela.

Yura also handed me a set of thermals, which I'd need to spot the sniper's infil, though not to shoot. I'd make sure the rifle was already in position, so when he showed up that night to take up his position, I'd be ready to pay him back the favor he'd done me.

Wrapping myself in a Mylar poncho, I found my place in a room behind a shot-out window overlooking what had been a rich man's balcony. The overwatch was itself concealed by a large and well-manicured pine bush. It was an improbable location, which made it perfect – the sniper wouldn't, in the darkness, even know that it was there, and if somehow he did notice it, the angle was off from his perspective. I chuckled to myself. Once again, I felt in sync with the world and the city. As it breathed, I did. As I exhaled, it did. Then I waited.

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It happened at 0200. The city was quiet – sleeping, mostly, with sporadic gunfire erupting between soldiers and APCs, or artillery booming nearby or in the distance. I felt it before I saw it. The sniper entered the room; tentatively at first – moving delicately and with care – and I recoiled within my thermal-dampening suit reflexively as the sniper scanned my room, presumably with some cheap (but sufficient) Chinese knockoff. He hesitated – something compelled him to look more deeply at my position – and I thought, did I leave a chink of warmth uncovered? Had I walked into a trap of my own? Was this the end of "The American Fapper?"

But then, the sniper continued scanning, until they found my dummy position. I'd placed an electric heater under the mannequin and concealed it, so while visible, barely, it was not conspicuous. When the sniper started setting up to shoot my double, I knew I had them.

Once they were settled on a table, I got ready to end things – no point in extending it, I thought, I'd had plenty of luck on

my side and didn't feel like testing God twice. Just before I lay the thermals down to site in the M14, though, a movement by the sniper startled me. They were undoing their pants and – was it possible? Were they about to do my move *on me?*

A wave of anger rolled over me, but before I had time to process the uncharacteristic emotion, I was struck by another, even greater shock; the sniper, as I could see from the means by which they were satisfying their vile urge, was a woman.

I'd heard of female snipers and knew the Ukrainian military fielded them (I saw none during my time in Mariupol but believe several were stationed there at that time), but for some reason it had never occurred to me that my own foe would be one – that the second greatest sniper in the city was, in fact, a woman. One who had by rights killed me, but for a trick of fate.

The thermal could tell me that much, but I did not know anything else about the target; whether she was old or young, pretty, or plain. One thing was certain: she was observing a version of me that I had placed to entrap her, and had, and was vigorously pleasing herself.

Here I encountered my third shock of the night. I went to leave the thermals, shrouding myself in darkness, to take the shot with the M14, and… I couldn't. Suddenly, I was back in Iraq, paralyzed by an inability to take and therefore make the necessary shot. My target was writhing in ecstasy before me, helpless, and there was nothing I could do.

Should I retreat, I thought? No – I probably wouldn't get another chance like this, certainly not after she realized the ruse. This was it. Do or die. I was trapped, paralyzed. There was nothing to be done.

Unless…

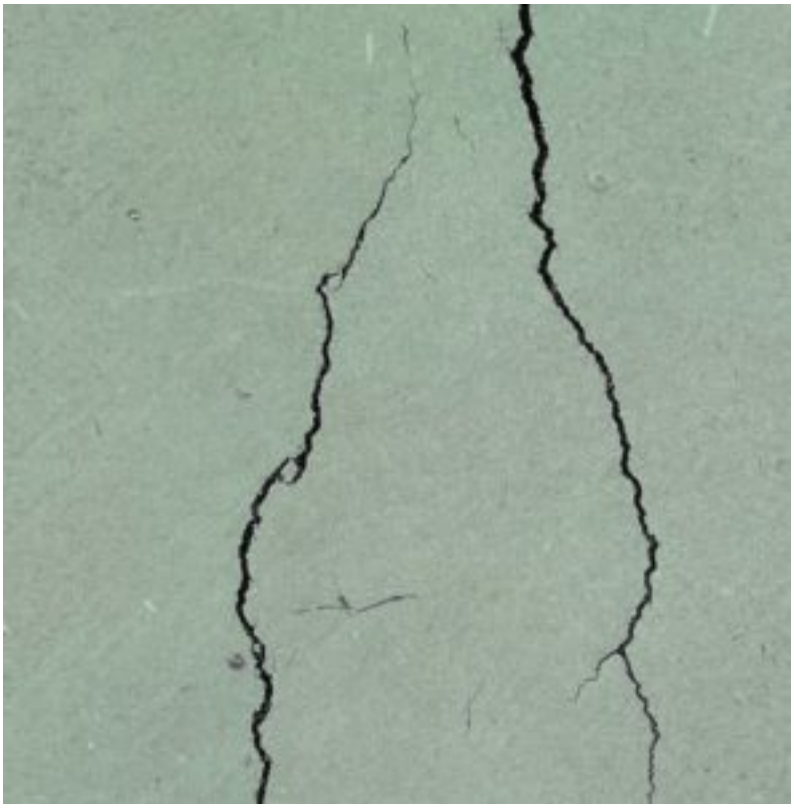
Then I realized. Of course. It had to be this way. I could

explain to Angela later. Or maybe not. Maybe this would never come between us. Maybe, it was this one moment, this last target that the universe was offering me, some kind of redemption for my past, here in a fallen city.

Without touching the rifle, I did my thing, quickly and efficiently. I finished, then slowly felt for the M14's cold wooden buttstock, laying my hands on its worn grains, bringing my cheek to the correct place, lining everything up. A flash in the sniper's window briefly illuminated her in the scope, allowing me to move the crosshairs ever so slightly over her (as I could see it) short-cropped blond hair and yes, attractive face, and placed my last shot as a sniper square between her gray eyes.

The story of how I managed to escape Mariupol before its fall, and Yura and Azov's brave stand alongside Ukrainian marines in the Azovstal fortress are stories known to all, and don't bear repeating. For myself, I'll always look back on those days as the pinnacle of my sniping career. Sometimes you get lucky. I did. Twice!

New Poetry from Shannon Huffman Polson: "On Orthodox Easter in Mariupol"



BETWEEN THE CRACKS */ image by Amalie Flynn*

On Orthodox Easter in Mariupol

We finished our jelly beans
red and yellow, purple, green,
the last bite of chocolate, unaware

that over in Mariupol
on this most holy day
sleepless mothers cradle children
on a steel factory floor.

Christ is Risen!

But in Mariupol people lie crushed,
the crossbeam too heavy,
cold factory chimneys rising cruelly
against the grey sky.

Nobody steps in from the crowd
to carry the cross.
There is no crowd
but circled tanks

in Mariupol.

Where is the Risen Christ
in Mariupol?

Outside the factory
mud is drying, small flowers
pushing up
between the cracks,
the birds returning, unaware

that inside people wait
in darkness,
the factory made for steel,
not people—
they sit
in vigil,
waiting.

New Nonfiction from Kristina Usaite: “Against a Cruel Society, I Came Out to Myself”

When I was losing myself, the only thing that saved me was immigrating to America. Only then, with great effort and

sacrifice, I was able to come out to myself and do what we all have to do for ourselves – to be who we are. Condemnation, fear, physical injury, loss, death – these are the first words in response to the question of how L.G.B.T.Q.+ people survive in post-Soviet countries. Many of us have been beaten or killed in one form or another. Where I'm from, Ukraine, fear lives in every vein. When you are a woman who loves another woman or a man who loves another man, this is included in the category of things people don't talk about. I grew up where the words *lesbian* or *gay* were not spoken, but other words were said I would not dare to say aloud. The traditional family was the only concept I grew up with, even though I can't connect myself to this concept. From an early age, I realized I had unusual feelings towards women, which I couldn't find a name for. The L.G.B.T.Q.+ topic was out of reach; I didn't know what questions to ask to understand who I am. I didn't know such questions could be asked.

In high school, others found me different. The stereotype that girls should wear skirts didn't leave my classmates, but it never took root in me. I was often asked when I'd look like a girl. I didn't know how to answer this question because I didn't understand it. I was already a girl. In my student years, the concept of my love was becoming clearer. But that didn't mean I could afford it. All my girlfriends lost their virginity, and I couldn't allow myself to be looked at differently. Even a bottle of vodka didn't help me to undress and go to bed with a man. After every unsuccessful attempt I had to lie to my friends. I had to carry condoms in my bag and show them with obvious visibility, so that no one had doubts creeping in. The fear that friends would start to despise me has always hung over me. There is a certain mentality of concepts and stereotypes that make you think that you should do the same as everyone else. In Ukraine, it is easy to surrender to society and miss the opportunity to discover who

you really are.

In my second year at university, I had my first relationship with a girl. We hid in dark corners where we could finally breathe. We could only hug briefly when meeting in public. Our hands met in places where there were no eyes. We often had to run away, to go to other cities where nobody knew us. Where we could look at each other and hold our gaze, not arousing too much attention with the smiles we exchanged. We loved loving each other, but we could only love in lies. We even lied to ourselves, saying these feelings have no life. I wanted to believe it was not so. But she couldn't help succumbing to society. She continued to love me, but at a distance with another man. I was sure this was the future that awaited me every time. There was no one who could tell me otherwise. No one who could talk to me at all.

At the time I met my second girlfriend, she was engaged to a man. Our relationship began soon after and a month later she had to get married. The fate of our relationship took the same turn as my previous one. We kissed behind the trees. We spoke words of love through messages and then immediately deleted them. We sent her fiancé to the store to find a moment alone, hugging each other, touching our hands. She wanted to leave him, but her attempts were unsuccessful. She said, "What am I going to tell my family? What will they think of me? I love you, but I have to marry him." I was maid of honor at her wedding. Kissing him, she kissed me too. Everything happened only because we believed these feelings had no place in this world.

Nobody knew I was a lesbian, including myself. I often denied my feelings and inclinations, and questioned if I was normal. Suddenly people began to understand who I was before I knew it. By deception, I was met in the courtyard where I was met by a few men to show me their strength in opinion. After regaining consciousness from beatings behind garages, I quickly came to the conclusion this was not my place to be. It

was useless to go to the police, knowing they were not involved in such matters. They would've shaken the hands of those who beat me for who I am. I had no one to expect help from. I no longer wanted to wake up behind garages. I decided to immigrate to America.

I had to study everything again after immigrating. I learned to speak openly. I learned to feel openly. I learned not to be afraid to feel. But it took a long time. I saw L.G.B.T.Q.+ communities in America and, at first, rejected them because fear lived deeper and stronger and didn't allow me to be touched by who I was. At my first job, an employee asked me if I was a lesbian. I immediately blurted out "no." It was the first time the word *lesbian* was applied to me in a positive form. For the first time, I heard in my head "I think I'm a lesbian." Later I found out half of our staff was gay. I didn't deny myself anymore.

My mother didn't know what I was struggling with. I couldn't lose her. In America I met many people from different countries, mainly Russia, who were disowned and abandoned by their parents. The pain the loss inflicted was unbearable. For a very long time I prepared to tell my mother who I was. She and I were very close, and in the absence of such large and significant information about me I didn't feel complete. On the phone, a year after I moved to America, the conversation happened. Having said I have a girlfriend, my mother's first question was, "Is everything good between you?"

No, you can't be silent. You can't give in, giving yourself up to people. You can't play by the rules and be convenient for others. I'm glad I'm on my side. It feels good to say – I am a lesbian. What is finally more important to me is that I feel. It took a large part of my life, and chasing a new one, to finally come out to myself.

Forgive Me

I have confused
the bombs
that were in
the desert

with those
birth control devices
implanted
in the uterus

Forgive me,
war and women,
I know nothing of either

Not For Sale: Private Farmland in Post-Soviet Ukraine

For those Americans who think about Ukraine at all, it is no secret that the country has faced two wars since 2014. The first, most conspicuous war, exists in Ukraine’s South and East, against Russia. The second, much less visible but far more important, exists throughout every city and village in Ukraine. This is the war to reform Ukraine’s government and

society.

Many of the reforms one hears discussed as priority items for Ukraine are useful, necessary preconditions to making it more European (which is to say, a better country). Judicial reforms to clean federal and oblast courts of corrupt, compromised judges is obviously a good idea. Transparency mechanisms that require journalists, non-profit workers and politicians to declare all income and assets is also good, and unquestionably useful in an aspiring western-style democracy.

One proposed change to Ukraine's legal or social system that gets an extraordinary deal of attention (as these things go) is reforms to permit the sale of agricultural farmland. Take this piece published by the World Bank, by the country director for Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine. It begins: "Land reform—lifting the moratorium on agriculture land sales—is the most powerful measure the government can take to boost economic growth and job creation, particularly in rural areas." Pieces in the Atlantic Council and other western publications make similar claims.

But what is Ukraine's law about land ownership? Where does it come from, and why does it exist? What are its goals? More importantly, what about land ownership in Ukraine needs reforming—why are the IMF, EU and World Bank so fixated on this specific issue?

The History of Land Ownership in Ukraine

To understand the law as it exists now, one must first understand the history that led into it. To do so, one could go back to the fall of the USSR and the distribution of collective, state-owned land to newly-enfranchised Ukrainian citizens. Or one could go back further, to the policies of collectivization that required citizens to live on land that they themselves did not own.

To really get a feeling for what land ownership means to

Ukrainians, though, it’s important to consider the traumatic rending that took place when they were forcibly separated from their land in the first place. This process occurred primarily in the 1920s and 1930s, culminating with the events around what Ukraine calls the Holodomor—an engineered famine in which millions perished. Holodomor, much like the Holocaust, is perceived as a special type of outrage perpetrated specifically against the Ukrainian people. It was very much rooted in the land, and many Ukrainian people’s connection to the land, and the consequence of it was that afterwards, almost no Ukrainian owned his or her own farm. This event, or series of events, has been baked deep into the collective psyche of Ukrainians.

> Ukrainians have specific and intensely negative memories of the last time individual farmers lost their land in the name of collective livelihood and national prosperity

Many Russians counter that the famine was accidental and that the millions who died in Ukraine and across the USSR did so as the result of well-intentioned tragedy.

In order to assuage that historical trauma, one of the first actions taken by Ukraine’s second President, Leonid Kuchma was to privatize agricultural land held by the state. The way he did this was riddled with imperfection and the potential for corruption, but he made good on his promise to give the land back to the people. Any Ukrainian citizen could lay claim to parcels of agricultural land sufficient for their subsistence, and many did so (some others gamed the system and were able to seize or acquire good agricultural land far less expensively than would otherwise have been possible).

The extent to which Kuchma is remembered positively in Ukraine is due in large part to these reforms (overall, his legacy is very mixed owing to charges of murder and corruption). Only

Ukrainian citizens can own agricultural land, and it cannot be sold to corporations, or foreigners.

Whether one believes the Russian account of the 1930s or the account of Ukrainians, the fact remains that the famines of the 20th century and the connected process of collectivization (which involved forcibly parting people from their land) left a major, lasting impact on them. Any discussion of land ownership is guaranteed to bring up old and bad memories.

The Case for Land Sale

There are three primary reasons that one could support opening the sale of agricultural land to non-Ukrainians. First, it doesn't make economic sense to close markets off to foreign investment. Conservative estimates suggest that Ukraine could increase its GDP substantially (from 5-10%) simply by allowing foreigners and corporations to buy and sell these tens of millions of hectares.

Also, it's important to acknowledge that limiting the agricultural land market doesn't actually prevent foreign companies from using the land—it just means they have to "rent" it from villagers. The price for renting the land is not advantageous to the villagers—it can be less than $80 per year. In other words, the land laws as they exist have led to a busy, unregulated black market on what amounts to land sale. This serves to enrich some individuals or areas, but it does nothing for the government of Ukraine.

Third, land sale to foreigners would be a good move from a security standpoint, in the sense that encouraging foreign investment—specifically, *European* investment from places like the US, Britain, Poland and Germany—will go great lengths toward tying foreign interests to Ukraine. These countries

will have a stake in Ukraine's survival, because they'll have "skin in the game" beyond an ethical desire to see weak protected against strong (or strong-er).

To summarize: the case for agricultural land sale is that Ukraine will get richer and less corrupt, and foreign companies will care more about the country and thus be further incentivized to care about its protection.

The Case Against Land Sale

There are logical and illogical reasons to view farmland reforms with skepticism. The logical reasons first: as things currently stand, people are merely being exploited for their land. They still *have* land, which is better than not having it, because things can be grown on land and worst case scenario it is possible to feed a family with 2 hectares of good, fertile earth. A small family, yes, and not well-fed (but sufficiently well-fed), but human history is proof that people have been able to scrape by with less than one might think. So long as one has land, life is possible. Once it goes away—once the land has been sold—there is no going back to freedom.

Furthermore, the very things that are bad about a bunch of people owning two-to-four-hectare plots of farmland—inefficiency, less money—also make Ukrainian society more resilient than most of its western, European neighbors. It's difficult to imagine what would happen to the USA if it were to go two weeks without food being delivered to supermarkets. In Ukraine, people know—they'd just call up their friends and families who live on farms, or buy food from local markets. There is a thriving "cottage industry" of individual and collective, non-corporate farmers who would keep people fed.

For some, farmland is more than just a business—it's a way of

living that goes back generations.

The Ukrainian agricultural holdings have a stake in this, too—the domestic corporations that struck the original rental agreements do not have the means to compete with foreign agricultural corporations. As things exist now they have good agreements with local villagers—and are uninterested in negotiating at terms that are disadvantageous to them.

Illogical reasons to oppose land sale both relate to history. One is the immediate history of Ukraine—the famines and/or Holodomor—which saw private land stripped from individuals wholesale, and created a large well of bitterness toward the idea of any large organization (cooperative, Kyiv, Moscow) having direct and absolute say over land use.

Another is the broader history in Ukraine of foreign exploitation, which feels worse than domestic exploitation. Selling agricultural land to foreigners, for better or for worse, sends a very strong and negative message to Ukrainians. Populists and domestic agricultural concerns have done a great deal to stoke fears over Chinese or Russian corporations buying up Ukrainian land and then oppressing Ukrainian villagers and destabilizing its economy and security—fears that have some basis in reality, in both cases (China is still ostensibly communist, and Russia occupies large swaths of Ukrainian territory).

Who Stands to Lose What

Investors stand to lose access to markets. The nation of Ukraine stands to lose—hypothetically—increased profits generated from a more efficient agricultural sector and a less corrupt land black market. Ukraine also stands to lose the interest of European countries.

The people who have land in Ukraine stand to lose their

livelihoods and freedom, irrevocably. Ukrainian society stands to lose basic food security.

In Conclusion

It's difficult to say which idea is better. Pros and cons exist on both sides. There are good reasons to privatize the land, which would help Ukraine. There are also reasons to keep the land as it is—private, privately held. Ultimately, it comes down to whether one believes that a country is best served by collectivizing its interests and selling them to corporations for the biggest profit, or whether it's best served by a poor but enfranchised citizenry, which tends to be exploited by domestic (rather than foreign) agribusinesses.

On the Subject of Walls

While it's fallen off the news somewhat, one of Donald Trump's most conspicuous campaign-trail promises was to build a wall between the U.S. and Mexico. Not only did Trump say that a wall was necessary, but he said that he would get *Mexico* to build it, conveniently ducking the question of cost to U.S. citizens. This is because the border between the U.S. and Mexico is long, and walls are expensive. Especially the kind of well-built walls that are required to stop crafty humans from getting around them.

Ukraine has a wall of its own. Or, at least, it's building a wall. Sort of. In September 2014, during the height of Russia's attempts to intervene in Ukraine, shortly after Russia occupied Crimea and during the beginning of its ongoing incursion into Ukraine's east, lawmakers developed a plan to create a wall between Russia and Ukraine.

The wall received some coverage in Western Press—not much, but some—because building a wall along thousands of kilometers of territory is a big project, and the wall had a big number attached to it: 4 billion UAH (at 8 UAH to the dollar in 2014, $500 million, now at 26 UAH to the dollar, or about $160 million). The wall was scheduled for completion in 2018, and building commenced. Since then, there have been questions over whether or not it will be completed on time, according to the printed standards. There have been allegations of corruption, as well as questions over whether the planned structure would be capable of accomplishing its military mission of stopping Russian infiltration and military intrusion.

A Wall in Name Only

Based on reporting that I have done, including visits to the wall and interviews with subject matter experts, national security personnel, veterans, villagers living within 10 km of the wall, and online research, if the wall is completed as promised and planned, it will not serve as a significant military obstacle against Russia. Without being able to find any evidence beyond official statements and visual confirmation that *something* is being built, it's impossible to decisively state anything. Has money been embezzled? Maybe. It's Ukraine, so, maybe *probably*. Is the wall being built to standard? Has every meter of the border with Russia been accounted for? There's no way to confirm that construction has succeeded or failed.

As of right now, the wall consists of two elements. The first, which looks much like what the wall was supposed to be based on initial projections, are a series of well-developed emplacements near significant border crossing points along major highways. Ukraine's State Border Service and military units staff and patrol these sections, guarding against sabateurs, infiltrators, and the possibility of a Russian

military offensive. Practically speaking, of course, a ditch, concertina wire and double-fences won't create much more than a brief tactical pause for even the smallest military unit (and no pause for airborne or air assault units)—but (apparently) according to military thinkers and the politicians who give them strategic guidance, something is better than nothing at all.

This reality has given rise to a new story: the idea that the wall will be useful for stopping criminal activity. Smugglers and illegal border crossings will be diminished by the wall, which (along with the security provided by the wall) will help make Ukraine a safer and more law-abiding place. This has some merit to it, although it's also worth stating that every person with whom I spoke living near the wall viewed it as an eyesore at best, an actual nuisance at worst, and that it seemed (paradoxically) to be increasing smuggling and illegal activity—precisely the opposite of its intended effect.

Notwithstanding the views of its residents, the border area with Russia is startlingly, astonishingly open. When I visited the area north of Kharkiv last in February, I nearly walked *into* Russia. There was no wall present, though residents were on edge, and warned me (through the Ukrainian who was interpreting) that patrols came by every few minutes looking for people who didn't have a reason for being there. I assumed that they meant Ukrainian patrols.

As of February 2017, two years after the battle of Debaltseve and three years after the invasion of Crimea, it was still possible to walk into Russia from Ukraine, more or less accidentally.

Why Should We Build a Wall?

Walls require strength and power, and wealth. They require organization and commitment, and maintenance. They are also the single most noticeable evidence of a nation's insecurity and fragility. What nation requires walls? What confident *people* would even think about erecting barriers? A weak nation, filled with anxious and neurotic people. And while this describes Ukraine to a certain extent—with all due respect to my Ukrainian friends, whom I love and respect, and with due respect for the idea of a country called Ukraine, (a) Ukraine as a country lacks significant allies, and has an overwhelmingly powerful enemy on its doorstep while (b) its people are justifiably traumatized by the repeated revolutions and various attempts by Russia and Russian agents to undermine their economy, political autonomy, military, and (writ large) their independence.

Those justifications don't travel very well when the destination is the U.S.A. Although walls require power, money, and strength to build, they aren't *for* the powerful, they're for the weak, the fragile, the exhausted. Walls exist where there is no energy left to patrol, where one believes that some powerful energy or tendency toward chaos and entropy will, left *un*walled, lead inexorably to conquest. This is what certain Americans believe: that a wall with Mexico is necessary, presumably because Mexico is more powerful, and left to its own devices, Mexico's Mexican inhabitants will swarm over the border and destroy what they find on the other side.

Of course, if U.S. citizens legitimately believed that Mexicans constituted some type of threat, the response to Mexico would be different from wall-building. What Americans fear is not Mexico—it's the loss of control, it's not being able to convince others that it is in their best interests to behave according to America's best interests. In many ways, this has been the story of the millennium, a slow-building narrative since the towers came down on 9/11.

On a psychological level, it seems almost certain that to Americans, the wall with Mexico is a replacement for the Twin Towers. We want to rebuild the towers and protect them from being blown up. We will call the product of this constructive but paranoiac impulse "The Wall with Mexico." It's a sad and quixotic impulse, if impossible due to constraints built into the space-time continuum.

But Why Build a Wall at All?

There are good points to be made against the building of walls. They restrict commerce, dampen the flow of accurate firsthand experience between citizens of different countries, reduce the ability of people to communicate, and lead to factionalism, nationalism, and the dangerous kind of international competition.

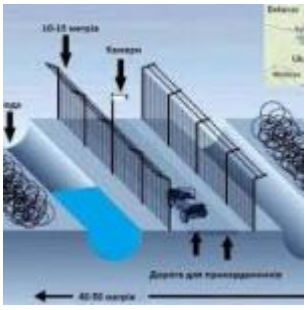
Walls are a last resort, when one must defend oneself against some foe that cannot be deterred by any other means. They are fixed positions that generate no revenue and require great sums for their upkeep. They can be avoided with the use of airplanes, rockets, and boats. They are as useful and

necessary as fixed fortifications (which is to say, not very).

Ukraine’s excuse for building a wall is that it’s hard up for emotionally satisfying ways to thwart Russia. A wall is something that is seen, and can be measured, and will make it more difficult to enter Ukraine from Russia. There are many downsides, but from the perspective of Ukraine, a much smaller country than Russia, and isolated from meaningful alliances, building a wall is *something* (given that it actually gets built, rather than partially funded while the remainder of the funds designated to build it are pillaged by oligarchs).

Ukraine’s planned wall with Russia—the word impregnable quickly springs to mind

Where the wall is supposed to be and what it’s supposed to look like



No attacker could ever possibly breach this conceptual wall, it is perfect

For Americans, the question is different. To begin with, it is a more powerful country than Mexico—the most powerful nation in the world, in fact. Its southern border with Mexico is patrolled by drones, security personnel, helicopters, dogs, radar, and automatic detection systems. There is already a fence separating the two. *Inside* the U.S., it's very difficult to exist off the grid without eventually running into some electronic or procedural requirement that will establish that one is in the country illegally (whether the people monitoring those systems do anything about it or not is a different question).

Normally, one builds walls under desperate circumstances when no other possibilities are available to solve some critical international question or another. Mexico's turmoil stems from the illegal drug trade. The drug trade is profitable in part because it is so unpleasant to live in a capitalist society that objectifies its citizens that many U.S. citizens will pay excellent money for drugs that are easily fabricated and refined in Mexico, and in part because the U.S. (despite creating and abetting the conditions by which citizens would want to use drugs in the first place) has criminalized non-prescription drug use, artificially inflating the market to the point where Mexican citizens involved in the trade can afford to build private armies large enough to contend with the government's military (or simply buy government units wholesale). Rather than build a wall with Mexico, it'd be cheaper and ethically more humane to do something about the drug trade—legalizing and taxing drugs would be an excellent first step.

Ukraine cannot "settle" with a Russia intent on its partition and destruction—Ukraine is left with the unpleasant choice of having to just grit its teeth and do what it can to prevent

Russian intrusion. A wall isn't the best way to do that, and especially when details of the wall's construction are kept secret. Still, it's *understandable* in a way that the U.S. wall with Mexico is not.

In Defense of Writing Modern Epic

At some point during my education, I developed a powerful sense of skepticism toward the Epic. Every literary or cinematic attempt to tell the story of a nation on behalf of the nation ended up oversimplifying distinctions, privileged the powerful over the weak, and trivialized or marginalized individual stories outside the mainstream. I don't remember whether it was high school or college when this idea metastasized in my consciousness as a kind of intellectual given, but somewhere between having to read Virgil's *Aeneid* and watching *Saving Private Ryan* it occurred to me that big H History did more harm than good.

Timing may have had something to do with it. What was probably unthinkable to someone living in, say 1870s Great Britain was much more logical to a young man in 1990s USA. After the WWII and the Cold War, it felt like stories creating national frameworks were just so much exploitative triumphalism—not worth the effort it had taken to write them.

In the years since then, I've seen the U.S. begin its first "post-modern" wars—wars without any particular meaning or significance on a political or individual level beyond whatever an individual decides to ascribe to it. The world has watched as Russia invaded Ukraine, a war that continues to

this day, actively affecting millions of displaced civilians and hundreds of thousands on or near the front lines of fighting. The United Kingdom has voted itself out of Europe, while Germany and France have forged an increasingly humane and just path forward for the EU, working together. America, under Donald Trump, threatens to spin away from the rest of the world, or maybe even spin itself apart.

If the world is stable and secure, there is more space for individual storytelling, and individual stories take on a greater significance. But as the center collapses through a combination of inattention, greed, political nihilism and pressure from the extremities, it becomes more urgent to ask the question: if individuals are owed stories, allowed privileged place as the focus of modern novels or cinematic works, should some nations (those without Epics) be allowed to develop stories in order to help justify their existence, too?

The Argument Against Modern Epic

Epic is the purest intellectual form of nationalism—a powerful piece of literary or cinematic art that, in its execution, delivers an aesthetic, emotional justification for a nation's existence. It always begins with a hero who is struggling to build something from little (or sometimes nothing). Nationhood, and nationality, begin from a position of weakness. The arc of a television series or epic poem or novel moves from weakness to strength—often through war against some specific enemy. *The Iliad* describes Greek city-states struggles against the Trojans. *The Aeneid* explains the animosity between Rome and Carthage, as well as its struggles against various other nearby Latin tribes, and the Greeks. An Epic story is therefore an imperial story, whether or not the nation in question achieves empire, or (in the case of civilizations before the modern nation-state) nationhood. Hypothetically, this is not necessarily the case—many tribal societies describe their origins in terms of celestial or

supernatural birth.

Anything that founds its argument on the necessity of violent struggle against an enemy should be viewed with extreme skepticism. Violence on an individual and collective level can only be argued in the context of self-defense, and even then, moral purists might argue that peaceful non-resistance is a *better* way of conducting one's personal and professional affairs.

Even people who support "pre-emptive strikes" still couch the necessity of attacking another country or civilization in defensive terms—Germany of The Great War, Nazi Germany of World War II, Imperial Japan's sneak attack on Pearl Harbor, George W. Bush's U.S. invasion of Iraq and Vladimir Putin's Russian invasion of Ukraine all required that a significant portion of their country viewed their attacks in defensive terms. No modern nation state wages war purely for territorial expansion—most people instinctively recoil from the idea that violence is to an individual or community's long-term advantage.

Epic and national storytelling depend on heroes and villains, in-groups and out-groups, appropriate and inappropriate behavior. They create hierarchy, and ways of describing actions that exclude certain types of behavior. They are conservative, nativist, reactionary, and tend to privilege heteronormativity. They can give rise to fascism or national socialism, and taken to extremes, work to oppress individual rights.

Generation War

In 2013, Germany finally got around to making its own modern WWII mini-series. Inspired by *Band of Brothers* down to the last name of the two army protagonists (Winter), "Generation War" follows a group of typical Germans during WWII. Its original title in German translates loosely to "Our Fathers,

Our Mothers." It came in for a good deal of criticism by anyone with a hand in WWII who wasn't fighting for or alongside Germany.

Germany's "Band of Brothers" is a dark anti-Epic that follows the birth of modern Germany through the struggle of those citizens who were of fighting age during WWII

When the series came out, those criticisms felt universal in a way that they don't today. While there was always something to be said for German children and grandchildren getting a say in how they remembered their dying grandparents (caveated by the requirement that they face their crimes in daylight, without flinching). The makers of *Generation War* did not avoid the worst parts of WWII. the extermination of Jewish people, the extrajudicial murders of civilians and combatants, the basis of modern German *guilt*.

They did tell the story of WWII from the German perspective. This necessarily grants viewers a feeling that the protagonists deserve to live, a chance to make decent lives for themselves after the war. From this perspective, given that Nazi Germany is defeated, *Generation War* functions as an Epic, by forging a unified identity through loss.

As already noted, when one encounters this German story from the outside, either in terms of time, or space, or identity, the story quickly becomes problematic, even offensive. I noticed that the U.S. and the U.K. were left out of the story,

save throw-away lines about the U.S. having entered the war, the destruction of Germany's North African Army, and then about 150,000 Allied soldiers having landed in France. So much for my version of WWII! *Generation War* occurs almost entirely in or near Russia, on the Eastern Front. So it was for most German soldiers, whose experience of WWII was something that involved fighting Bolsheviks and/or Central and Eastern European partisans.

Meanwhile, the war represents Germany allies very unsympathetically. The two times Ukrainians are seen or mentioned are first as savage auxiliary police who horrify the protagonists by murdering Jewish women and children, and then later as "camp guards." But this isn't a Ukrainian version of WWII—it's *German*. Didn't Germans employ many locals to carry out reprisal killing against groups the Nazis saw as undesirable? Of course.

In German and Russian versions of WWII, there's always a savage auxiliary policeman beating helpless Jewish women and children, and that policeman is always Ukrainian

The Polish government brought a similar criticism to bear against the series. Watching *Generation War* it's not difficult to see why—Polish partisans play a major role when they shelter a major character, who is Jewish. This is important for the purposes of the plot because the Jewish character, Viktor, must keep his identity secret from the partisans, who are *far* more overtly anti-Semitic than even the creepy SS major (there's always a creepy SS major hunting and killing Jewish children in WWII stories). Whereas the SS major seems fairly dispassionate about the killing of Jewish people—it's

either his job, or he's a psychopath, or both—the Poles clearly harbor a personal hatred that transcends professional duty. Were the Poles all serious anti-Semites, moreso than the Germans? Surely not, surely not in *any* imagining or remembering. Then again, their hands weren't clean, either, regardless of Poland's experience of the war as a victim of German and Soviet aggression.

Why Defend Modern Epic

The point of this piece is not just to maintain that Germany has the right to tell WWII (caveated, as stated earlier) from its own perspective. German filmmakers succeeded in making *Generation War* into an Epic of their defeat, dignifying the characters who reject war and punishing those that don't. More broadly, the point of this piece is to argue that we live in an era when smaller nations like Poland and Ukraine should also seek to create national Epics that tell their stories, in as expansive a way as possible.

Let's focus on Ukraine. Portions of Ukraine's history have been told by Germany, Russia, Poland, and Austria-Hungary. This isn't sufficient for Ukrainians, and leads to a dangerous sense of national inferiority. Rather than having a central story to which all citizens can look, citizens interested in identifying themselves with nations look outside Ukraine. There is enough history to furnish an epoch-spanning story about the country—yet none exists.

What would such a project look like? A Ukrainian Epic would need to accomplish the following objectives. Firstly, there should be likable (which is to say heroic) characters from different national and historical backgrounds. Jewish, Polish, German, Hungarian, Romanian, Russian, Ukrainian and other groups all helped build modern Ukraine. Second, the story should be written to accomplish the difficult task of giving people from different backgrounds a place to inhabit—something

to call their own. Third, the series should begin at some suitable point in pre-history—maybe with the Scyth, or the Hittites—and, over the course of progressive seasons, follow history through to the present time. One way of diminishing the effect of casting certain people as groups or villains would be to use the *Cloud Atlas* approach. A character who is heroic as a Jewish Ukrainian resisting a Cossack pogrom in the 18th century might return as a Russian during the season that deals with WWI and the capitulation of Kiev to the Bolsheviks. As the seasons approach the present, time would condense, and people would have to be stuck into the roles that they inhabit the season before—until the final season, which would likely detail Euromaidan, and the current conflict with Russia.

All of the more dangerous elements of Epic would be difficulties that filmmakers or writer would need to overcome. But I think that it's possible to do so, to write or film a great work about and for Ukraine without relying on villainous enemies. To give Ukrainian children in the East and in the West an idea into which they can fit themselves—the idea of people loving and living under difficult conditions, in a vibrant crossroads that often finds itself in defensive wars against more powerful neighbors.

1917: Ukraine's First Bid to be Independent

The Red Revolution created space for independence in Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and – for a time – in Ukraine

This February marks the 100 year anniversary of an event that transformed Europe, brought the US into WWI, and nearly led to the destruction of capitalism. While it seems farfetched from the perspective of our western-dominated consumer-capitalist world order, a union between workers and soldiers—February Revolution, in Petrograd (now St. Petersberg)—toppled Russia's

Tsar Nicholas II and terrified the US and Europe.

These events also led to a (briefly) independent Ukraine. After it declared independence, Ukraine was embroiled in its first war for sovereignty and self-governance.

Military background

It’s impossible to imagine an independent Ukraine or the Russian revolution that made independence possible without WWI. Contemporary discussions of the feasibility of leftist organization or revolution in Europe or the US often overlook the importance of that extraordinarily damaging war to Lenin’s success.

And it didn’t take *much* war—the workers and soldiers of Petrograd rejected Moscow's authority after a bit more than two years of fighting. Consider by contrast that Germany would not surrender until 1918, and only after pushing Great Britain and France to the very brink of their own capitulation. Germany and Austria-Hungary differed from Russia, of course, in that both of them incorporated democratic mechanisms into their governance—whereas the Russian government was barely changed from that which had resisted Napoleon in 1812.

Critically, too, Russia was not directly attacked by Germany or Austria-Hungary—from the outset, those nations were fighting a war of self-defense, where Russia was the aggressor. Its largely-disenfranchised citizens did not see throwing millions of lives away in the name of "alliance" and land grabs as a good exchange.

Fighting in WWI was bloody, dramatic, industrial. As a country whose industrial base was more thoroughly exploited than others, the blood Russian soldiers shed told more deeply. Brusilov’s Offensive—a battle that lasted from June to September of 1916 that ended in major Russian gains, still

entailed millions of killed and wounded on both sides. More than any other battle, Brusilov's offensive was responsible for creating the conditions necessary for an independent Ukraine in both Austria Hungary and Russia.

As Russia's social order frayed, Germany and Austria-Hungary held on along the Western Front, scored important victories against the Romanians and Italians, and slowly fell back along the Eastern Front. While Russia advanced into Austro-Hungarian Galicia (part of modern-day Ukraine), trading heavy casualties for territory, its ctizens grew increasingly disgusted with the war. This disgust took different forms for the Russians, Fins, Estonians, Ukrainians, and Poles fighting for the Russian military.

It also wrecked Austria-Hungary's military and strained their society to the limit. These conditions were perfect for granting constituent populations greater political power and autonomy within Austria-Hungary. So long as groups were working against Russia and Russian interests, they were permitted to go about their business.

So it was that Russia traded battlefield success for social stability. The empire was teetering on the brink of revolution, and when workers and soldiers revolted in Petrograd, the Tsar abdicated his throne. He was replaced by a Soviet-friendly government led by Alexander Kerensky.

This could have been the end of Russia's problems. Seeking to follow up on victories in 1916, however, and eager to propitiate military committments to France and England, Kerensky pushed the Russian military further. Despite making some progress at the beginning of an offensive operation, when the Germans and Austro-Hungarians counterattacked and the Russians began taking heavy casualties, the offensive halted, then turned into a rout. Rather than unifying his country and quieting social unrest as Kerensky had hoped, the military failure resulted instead in the total collapse of Russian

morale.

By June of 1917, moderate socialists declared the “Ukrainian People’s Republic” in Kyiv. In October of 1917, Kerensky's government collapsed, and he was forced to evacuate in front of Bolshevik forces. Lenin signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March of 1918, bringing Russia's role in WWI to an official end.

Social Background

Ukraine experienced a wave of nationalist sentiment during the 19th and 20th centuries. Many Ukrainians believe that this understanding of themselves as Ukrainian dates back to their national literary and artistic icon, Taras Shevchenko. Shevchenko wrote in Ukrainian in the mid-19th century about a Ukrainian nation. Publishing in Ukrainian was forbidden in Russia then, as was doing anything that could be construed as advocating for autonomy or independence.

A counter to the “Ukrainians were waiting for a hero to unite them” narrative can be found with Russian historians, who claim that Ukrainian nationalism (like the language) was an invention of the Austro-Hungarians, a 19th-century example of one nation attempting to destabilize another. On its face, it sounds reasonable—Russia has distinct ethnicities, and using them as a lever to undermine Moscow’s authority would be a brilliant plan. It’s also what the Russian empire did with the Kingdom of Serbia, which helped lead to WWI.

There are problems with the Russian reading of history. If Austria-Hungary invented Ukrainian in the mid-late 19th century, then why did Russia ban Ukrainian in the early 19th century? Why was Taras Schevchenko’s poetry, written in Ukrainian, perceived as a powerful tool of subversion to Russian interests? One can’t “invent” a language overnight,

nor can one compel people to read or speak a language in sufficient numbers to make rebellion, resistance, or alternate identities feasible. The popularity of Shevchenko's poetry and the threat with which it was viewed by the Russians offers powerful testimony against some Russians' claim that Ukraine was a Russian-speaking part of Russia with no sense of itself as having a history or culture separate from Russia.

Furthermore, Austria-Hungary is rarely mentioned in histories as a net exporter of intrigue—the empire's strengths included administration, bureaucracy, and multiculturalism, but its weaknesses included modern force projection and subterfuge. There was no legion of Austro-Hungarian spies flooding into its neighbors to undermine or destroy native sovereignty.

Still, there is some truth to the Russian claims. Austria-Hungary did not have the same laws restricting publication of books in minority-ethnicity languages as did Russia. So the poetry of Taras Shevchenko was free to spread and germinate outside Russia's borders, in a way that it wasn't inside Russian-occupied Ukraine. The free spread of powerful anti-Russian ideas did, then, occur in Austria Hungary—but not because it was part of an Austro-Hungarian plan. Rather, anti-Russian ideas spread because there was a group of people, Ukrainians, with their own distinctive language and culture, and it spread because there was a nearby nation-state that offered Ukrainians freedom of speech, thought, and identity, as well as political opportunity. Austria-Hungary may have given Ukrainians reason to hope for independence, but it did not do so deliberately.

Russia exiled Taras Shevchenko and denied that Ukrainians were a people apart from Russians, while referring to them separately as "Little Brothers" and banning the publication of any literature in the language most "Little Brothers" spoke. Still, the idea spread among Ukrainians that they were a group apart from Russia. This was true for Austria-Hungary as well. Czechoslovakia, Poland, Yugoslavia, Hungary, and western

Ukraine all lay within Austria-Hungary's borders (to say nothing of Austria and Hungary).

Austria Hungary was great at letting people be themselves, but not as good at getting them to cooperate to defeat their neighbors, which is why that Empire isn't there any more

It is worth pointing out here that an expansion of this idea, self-determination, used so effectively as a tool against the Austro-Hungarians, ultimately resulted in the destruction of the British, French, Belgian, Spanish and Portuguese colonial empires.

So while the Allies were encouraging western Ukraine (then called Galicia) to understand itself as separate and distinct from Austria-Hungary, the Austro-Hungarians (who had always seen ethnic minorities as entitled to their own languages and cultures so long as they did not interfere with governance, conscription, or the collection of taxes) were permitting Ukrainian identity to germinate and spread in their own territory. Those western Ukrainians, who saw themselves as part of an entirely different nation that, historically, had extended far into Russia, cooperated with Ukrainians living under Russian occupation.

Political Background

At the same time that the Brusilov Offensive was breaking the Russian military's morale, wrecking Austria-Hungary's military capacity to fight, and outraging Russia's industrial

population against the Tsar, many populations were preparing to declare themselves independent. Finland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania all date their modern independence to 1917 or 1918.

The Allies – Great Britain, France, and (as of April 1917) the USA—were in a bind. Ostensibly supportive of Russia as a military ally, they were hostile to Russia's absolutist monarchy and what they perceived as its unenlightened social order. Supporting movements that promised ethnicities independent, sovereign nations apart from Russia would be in accordance with their ethical logic, but would also assist Germany, their enemy.

While the Allies were deliberating how to respond to Russia's political situation, Russia was engulfed in flames. Before the Allies could mount an effective campaign to support Russia's Tsar, he abdicated his throne. His successor, Alexander Kerensky, attempted to work with the Allies by continuing Russia's participation in WWI on the side of the Allies, and ordered an offensive that was turned back by the Germans, who then overran Ukraine and Belarus.

Aftermath

Ukraine's ambitions for an independent state unraveled swiftly after 1917. The provisional Ukrainian governments in Kyiv and in Lviv were both willing to work with the Germans at first. That changed when they learned that Ukrainian independence was not part of Germany's plans for the region, and Germany began cracking down on Ukrainian politicians and nationalists. If Imperial Russia was unable to contain Ukraine's ambitions for a State, several German divisions had no chance. Nationalism continued to spread, and while the minor German occupying force was enough to enforce a superficial subjection to German rule, it also bought Ukraine time to organize while the Central Powers fought it out with

the Allies. It wasn't enough: after Germany's defeat in 1918, a republic in the West of Ukraine was defeated by a joint French/US/Polish force. Meanwhile, the Ukrainian republic based in Kyiv was steamrolled by the Red Army.

Ukraine did not become legally independent from the USSR until 1991, and continued its status as a de facto Russian proxy until 2014. It is a strange accident that it should have taken nearly 100 years, but in fighting against Russia's latest invasion, Ukrainians may have finally achieved that for which many of them had hoped 100 years ago—a real nation of their own.

Last Week This Week 8-28-16

Wrath /ræθ/ ***noun***

1: strong vengeful anger or indignation (chiefly used for humorous or rhetorical effect)

2: retributory punishment for an offense or a crime: divine chastisement

On WBT

Adrian writes about how deep war memories go in today's Eastern Europe, especially Ukraine

Another one by Adrian discussing the legacy of the British retreat at Dunkirk and its possible modern corollary—Brexit

Editor’s Recommendations

American Politics

Charles R. Pruitt writes on how politics is gutting the equalizing institutions that at one point made the American Dream seem more than a myth: public Ivies

Big brother watches Baltimore and Big Business reaps the bounty, reported in Bloomberg

World Politics

Piece by Anne Applebaum in New Republic that bears revisiting on Ukraine

Wired peers inside the clandestine world of Soviet cartography

A deeper look into Russia's well-oiled propaganda machine

Military

SEAL Team six and a man left for dead

History

The story of the East India Company, the original corporate raiders and a private empire unto itself

Sports and Politics

Old but good during run-up to NFL season and a propos patriotism and the Colin Kaepernik pseudo-scandal

Yuppies

A viral video of yuppie privilege becomes a Chicago neighborhood walking tour

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World War Two Never Ended

World War Two never ended. It sounds like the plot of a dystopian science fiction novel, right? Either the bad guys won, or the good guys didn't win, and either way, history as we know it isn't right. You can hear the Hollywood producer saying "great premise, kid, get a star to sign on and we'll run it on Netflix for a couple seasons, see if it sticks." Or some kind of click-magnet bait-and-switch b.s., like "well, technically Germany only signed a ceasefire…"

This essay is about an astonishing thing that I discovered while traveling in Eastern Europe, where much of the worst killing took place during the World War Two. What I discovered was this: for some people—mostly in Ukraine—WWII is still going on. It never ended.

This first occurred to me as a possibility while traveling with NATO forces in Poland for Foreign Policy. There was an intense moment when the Poles observed German armored vehicles, tanks, and bridging assets crossing the Vistula River. A shadow crossed the faces of Polish Generals and civilians, I saw it happen: it started off as shock, then anger, then, over time, a kind of understanding. The Germans were back, yes, but as partners and allies. In other

words—until that intellectual confrontation with the German military in their present-time, World War Two had not ended for the Poles.

About a month later, while interviewing a couple from Luhansk Oblast, the Ukrainian couple mentioned their 91-year-old grandmother. The elderly woman, a supporter of Ukraine, continued living Luhansk after the separatists took over because (like many from her generation in Ukraine's east) she was simply too frail and poor to pick up and move. Fuzzy on the math, I asked them what she'd seen in her lifetime. Their answer? Holodomor, the Nazi Occupation, the Holocaust, the undeclared war with Poland, the Soviet recapture and plunder of Ukraine, the destruction of Ukraine's anti-Soviet rebellion by 1954. This was the first thirty years of one human's life.

Later, conducting analysis on the heavily industrialized east of Ukraine, along the contact line (where millions are at risk of shelling or attacks), I saw many elderly civilians confined to their homes, I became curious. How many people would have known about World War Two from their childhood? I used 1934 as a starting point, because (excluding Holodomor) WWII began for Ukraine in 1941, and I can remember being 7-8 years old pretty clearly. Being 10-15 is even clearer in my mind's eye. Well, according to numbers from 2014, there should be between 900,000 and 1.2 million Ukrainian citizens alive today who (judging from the things my grandfathers remembered after they slipped into senility) remember WWII. All of them understand that their country is at war. Tens of thousands of them live in the area directly threatened by hostilities.

Memory is a powerful tool. What, whether, and how a thing is remembered determines a lot about whether it stays active in

the present. A woman broke my heart in college, and it took me years to get over it. That event was my present. People suffering from PTSD relive the trauma of the stressful event over and over—without medication, often, for the rest of their lives. Which explains why people who are traumatized are at greater risk for alcoholism, drug abuse, and suicide.

So we have a population that grew up suffering under Stalin, the actual (not metaphorical) Hitler, and then Stalin again, which is currently being re-traumatized by Putin's Russia. This brings us to the reason that World War Two never stopped.

World War Two never stopped because it was a war fought over whether repressive anti-englihtenment totalitarianism would rule Europe and the world, or whether humanism and western values (even those espoused haphazardly as in republican oligarchies like the United States) would hold sway. And while we have said that we won WWII and the Nazis lost, or that the Soviet Union won WWII and the Nazis lost, the truth is, the intellectual and ideological conflict at the heart of WWII never disappeared. On the one hand, it didn't disappear because the Soviet Union was basically a more enthusiastic and popular if less well organized version of Nazi Germany (especially after 1945, when ethno-linguistic nationalism drove Russian ethnic cleansing)—and the USSR lasted well into the 20th century. So all the places that we neglected to liberate from the Soviet Union were basically places where WWII didn't have a chance to end, at least until the USSR's collapse. Because of active wars today, to some of those places (like Ukraine), we might as well have never fought WWII in the first place.

After all, even though we've moved on and successfully contained our understanding of World War Two

The Old Woman of World War Two – still traumatized after all these years

to kitsch movies or good-timey-grandpa television series, there are people in every country who still aver that nationalism and race are ethically valid (even *necessary)* ways of organizing people, that constant war against cultural nor national enemies should inspire praise or enthusiasm rather than anger or condemnation. These people exist in America, and in Russia, in Ukraine, Poland, and Germany. In Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Yemen, and Pakistan, and China and India. In Japan, of all places (proving that even nuclear weapons are not as powerful as human endurance).

We tell ourselves that World War Two ended because we have bad ways of understanding conflict—we speak in legal terms. A declaration of war means that the budget is spent certain ways, and that other types of medals become permissible for killing human beings. War is a state of being, where one lives in more or less constant anxiety that one's life will be taken, or that one will be hurt so badly that one will wish for death. War is rape, and murder, and looting, and lies—war is everything that's horrible about humans, brought out from the darkness and celebrated. War is also a legal state of relations between nation-states that become committed to each other's destruction—between ideas, and ideology.

But World War Two didn't end. Not in victory for us, nor in defeat for the Nazis, who somehow spread their way of thinking into other countries around the world, their vile attitudes toward religious and ethnic minorities, their appalling lack of humanity and contempt for post-enlightenment human rights.

WWII did not end in victory for the Soviet Union, either, because the Soviet Union ended up incorporating the most meaningful platforms of Nazi Germany (ethnic nationalism based around Russia, rather than Germany, and victimizing minorities like Jewish people). For the UK's part, it lost its empire trying to stand for the things that might prove that it really had won WWII, or at least been on the winning side. Emancipating its former colonies was a decent gesture, but ultimately irrelevant, as Brexit has demonstrated—eighty years after the conclusion of WWII, it's likely that today's England would have allied with Hitler's Germany, or at least managed to stay neutral. From an economic, ideological, and geopolitical position, the only country to come out conspicuously ahead after WWII was the United States of America.

World War Two lives on in the memories of those who survived the Holocaust, in places like the USA, France, Russia, and Israel. It continues in the daily shelling endured by eighty-five-year-old women who live too close to the artificial border of the republics of Donetsk and Luhansk, and who are still drawing water from the wells of their grandparents. The ideas that compelled Europe to tear itself to shreds twice in three decades are still alive and well. The job begun of clearing darkness from Europe, the night of pre-enlightenment thinking, has yet to be completed.

Berlin, and the Trip East

They're rebuilding Prussian Berlin. Not exactly the way it was

before World War II, but Prussia is unquestionably the inspiration. The city is unified, the country is unified, and for the first time in the 21st century, there is a desire to rediscover a German narrative beyond the horrors spawned by World War II. Construction along the city's broad boulevards, paintings of Frederick the Great mustering out boxes of jauntily-clad soldiers, emphasis on a type of architectural façade as well as a certain indescribable impression one receives in the beer halls and coffee shops – everything points in the same direction. Rebirth is in the air this Spring, the rebirth of a confident Germany, a Germany that can assert its place in the world without the ever-present burden of recent history. Further east, Russia seems to be undergoing a similar sort of national rebirth. I'm uncomfortable with both of them. To hell with rebirth, to hell with Spring, to hell with the nice weather and puffed-out chests. Let's live in the cold.

At dinner, with German officers from the Bundeswehr. We'd served together in Afghanistan, and their thoughts on history and the direction of Germany had influenced my own for some years. They'd taken part in the first offensive actions for Germany since World War II – fighting overseas and having to abandon hard lessons from the 20th century in order to support the Global War on Terror had left them adrift in their own country. Imagine: what must it be like, to discard one's grandfathers' and grandmothers' experience – to have been told and educated to hate what they had done in the 1930s and 40s – and then later be told to discard the experience of one's father and mother as well? My own experiences protesting Iraq, joining the military, and fighting in Afghanistan inspired in me a strong sense of fellowship and sympathy with my German veteran friends, bereft and necessarily abandoned by their own countrymen. The conversation is brisk, over a traditional Bavarian meal of sausage, hamburger, potatoes and mustard with plenty of beer to wash the meal down. The officers discuss the state of the German military – funding is difficult to come

by. They talk about the new mission to Mali, the challenges faced in training the local forces, which we'd seen before with the Afghans. Four battle groups of Malian forces were recently sent north to reclaim a city, and failed completely – routed by the insurgents. When I ask them about Ukraine, they seem uninterested in the subject, save to point out that there is a great deal of sympathy in Germany for the Russian perspective, and for the narrative that this conflict has been caused by America and NATO. The idea that this quarrel could spill into Poland or Germany is unthinkable. They are, as I was when I was in the military, focused entirely on solving the problems facing their units today. This is what it's like to be in the German military: no money, no support from politicians, little respect from a resentful population, and a mission to Mali.

Walking back to the hotel Adlon Kempinski from lunch with a colleague, I pass the Russian embassy. There's a small gathering in the middle of Unter Der Linden, the long tree-lined Prussian boulevard that leads to an iconic sight in Berlin: Brandenburg Tor. Two older men and four women in their mid- to late-forties have assembled a small collage of photos from the war in Ukraine. I approach the man doing the most talking. He smells unwashed, and wears a disheveled tweed jacket and slacks, as well as tinted glasses. The women mill nervously and huddle close as he begins lecturing me about the horrors of war with heavily Russian-accented English. According to him, this war is the fault of America and NATO. America wants to buy Ukraine, and the whole world. He points at a picture of dead children and body parts and repeats his indictment of America. I want to know why – why he thinks America is doing this, what its motivation could be. He cannot or will not explain his reasoning, and I leave him, feeling that any explanation for what he described as the United States' actions, however unsatisfying, would be better than no explanation at all. He is the only man shouting in Berlin.

Earlier, talking with a German anthropologist / ethnographer. What's going on in Germany? What's happening? He tells me about the rise of right-wing extremism in a country long unused to such impulses, the people called "*Putinverstehe*" or "Putin-understanders," who see American expansionism as basically responsible for Russia's recent actions in and around Ukraine. He explains that there's a growing lack of confidence in facts, or the news, analogous to radical elements in America's Tea Party, or certain groups on the fringes of the left. There's a movement – "*ludenpresse*," or "lying press," where any story reported by the media is decried as unreliable. My own voyage to Ukraine has been conceived based on a skepticism toward media reports, but this phenomenon of "lying press" is something different. I am not disputing that facts can be reported, I don't think the media lies, or intentionally misrepresents reality, merely that it is interested in selling newspapers or articles, and that tends to narrow the focus of how facts are presented. Journalism is possible, today, and as necessary as ever. The crisis of confidence in media outlets seems to be in part political – unscrupulous politicians, propaganda from Russia, a growing sense of Germany's vulnerability, its position outside history. Maybe, I add, America does have something to do with it as well – a country doesn't just decide to assign responsibility for a situation. In Russia, perhaps, the Russian people are used to the idea of America as an enemy, just like Americans are accustomed to remembering the Russians we grew up watching in James Bond films. It seems to me, I remember a time when it felt like (I could be wrong) there was an opportunity to revise that narrative – to present an alternative to the Russian-versus-American story. But back in the 1990s and early 2000s, the Russians continued to play the role of bad guy in media, in movies, politics and television shows. Now, it may be too late to change that story.

Leaving Berlin, I remembered an accident of history: one of the reasons the South is supposed to have lost to the North in

the United States' Civil War had to do with railway tracks. Among other issues, there were different standard gauges of track in different states – Virginia and North Carolina shared the same track-style, but the rest of the South did not. Towns and states did not decide of their own accord to build a rail system where the tracks ran uninterrupted. This caused numerous delays unloading and reloading trains with people and equipment at town and state borders, amounting to the loss of hours or even days during longer hauls. I don't know if this actually contributed to the defeat of the South, but it seems plausible to me that time wasted unloading and reloading trains, every day, could very easily have been multiplied over the long run. The North, on the other hand, enjoyed uniform, connected railways that linked towns and cities across the length and breadth of the Union. One of the things you learn, in Warsaw, trying to take a train to Ukraine, is that Ukraine has a different railway system, with different tracks, and that one must wait at the border for about an hour while the train is lifted from one carriage onto another set of wheels. Furthermore, one must transfer at least twice during the trip, and I found no trains that could make the journey in less than 16 hours. There's no direct way to reach Kiev, the capital of Ukraine, by rail from Warsaw, the capital of neighboring Poland. There are, on the other hand, direct trains from Russia to Kiev, that take between 10 and 12 hours.

The back-room bar is a popular form in Berlin, and is suitable to the city's recent history as a place of spying and intrigue. A roommate from college is in town, and he brings me to two of the better bars in the city. One has a long bar and rows of whiskeys and bourbons lined up. I'm surprised to find (among the rest) bottles of Pappy Van Winkle, about which I've only read. The bartender explains that there are better bourbons that aren't as well known, and treats us to glasses of a bourbon I've never heard of. Smelling the booze sets my nose afire, and drinking it does the same to my throat. Later we talk about the Bundeswehr. Everyone left in the bar has

served, and has a story about their time in the service. Somehow Ukraine doesn't come up. Instead, they want to talk about *American Sniper*. When we leave, it's light outside. The next night we head to a different bar, which has few brand alcohols displayed. This, I am told, places emphasis on the cocktail – its preparation, the presentation, and enjoyment on its own terms. Each bar is among the best in the world, and appeals to a different human sensibility – the one, a desire to drink well-known, branded alcohols. The other, a desire to feel serviced, to be part of a production. Both are absolutely excellent. When I inquire about Ukraine at the second bar I'm asked to keep my voice down.

As my departure from Berlin looms, I am seized with an unreasonable fear of the future, of the East. Relics of Germany's defeat and downfall are scattered about the city-scape. Check-Point Charlie, aging concrete residential buildings, a huge radio tower that looms over the city like a giant retro antenna. It's not hard to imagine being a young man in a different Germany, in a different era, hearing that one has been assigned to the East – the Eastern Front. What must that have felt like, in 1943 or 1944, knowing what was happening against the Soviets? Knowing that the train ride through Poland would only end in one place – bloody, broken, bleeding on the battlefield? Malaparte talks about the look of fear in German soldiers' eyes in 1942, and I can feel it, too, that fear. I worry that the lessons of World War II – the carnage of the Eastern Front, of The Holocaust, are vanishing. In the Holocaust memorial, three young girls with backpacks carry a "selfie-stick" and huddle close around the center girl as they walk deeper into the memorial.

One restaurant my college roommate and I visit lets us down – a place called *Pantry*. When we arrive, the place is noisy but not particularly busy, while the bar is completely full. We are greeted by a short balding man. I ask, in English, what sort of food they serve. He asks if we have a reservation. I

tell him that we do not, and he says that it will be impossible to serve us. His eyes have narrowed, in that way the eyes do when they are seeing something they don't like. It occurs to me that somehow I've offended him – that I've made a tactical error by feeling so comfortable in his country, and with my friend, that my speaking English has for whatever reason alienated him, that he has interpreted the gesture as being indicative of a lack of respect for his culture, or a gesture of American imperialism, and that's not it at all. In fact, it's sort of the opposite – it's a moment of human vulnerability. I cannot redress the error, though I try. He has judged me.

There are no direct flights from Warsaw to Kiev. Everything requires a connection, a transfer, a wait. This is characteristic of the ways in which European countries still, in spite of the hopeful promise of the EU, view their neighbors with suspicion. Otherwise, how to explain this: I board my plane in Warsaw, then fly back to Frankfort. At Frankfort, and the other passengers unload from the plane onto a bus at gate B25. I ask whether I might just enter the terminal, as my gate is B33, and am told that this is impossible. The other passengers and I then take the bus back to the terminal, where the bus disembarkation is delayed just ten feet from the terminal doors – "please do not exit the bus, it has not arrived at the terminal," we are told. Five minutes later the doors open, we disembark, and I make my way through passport control. B33 is about a kilometer away. I run it, a flat-out run, and after a brief pause at gate B25 to take note of the situation and mentally shake my fist at the whole arrangement, I continue on to my gate, arriving as boarding begins. I think about how much easier such a transfer would have been in almost any U.S. airport. The transition from State to Federal identity is still contested in the United States – it seems that in Europe, it is really just beginning. This is an important thing to note when considering our own position, when evaluating the situation in Ukraine,

and – as in Iraq and Afghanistan – what we're really capable of contributing, how best to help.

Curzio Malaparte: Great & Anonymous WWII Writer

How World War II gets remembered isn’t accurate, and for Curzio Malaparte, it's not even true. Not the American version, not the Russian, not anywhere, really. At best, our memory of WWII has become a lie founded on emotional connections to people barely known in life. A series of well-intentioned miscommunications and words spoken (or not) in German, Italian, Russian, Japanese or English across untranslatable generational gaps. The product of the optimistic if misplaced belief that one human could ever be said to understand another without dreaming some part of one’s own self and aspirations into them. Less good, our memory of WWII is a thoughtless generalization, and ultimately, a stand-in for racism, nationalism, and all the worst stereotypes that made anyone feel good about going to the War in the first place. Worst case scenario, it’s a deliberate deception – the product of malicious individuals or concerns eager to portray the narrative in ways that advantage themselves and their interests.

In the version of WWII I grew up with – the one popular here in America – here’s how it happened. This comes from my grandfathers, one of whom was an enlisted man in Europe with the U.S. Army, and the other of whom was in the U.S. Army Air Corps, an officer (Lieutenant) in a B-24 Liberator. Nazi Germany declared war on Europe and beat them, save for Italy,

which was Germany's comically inept ally that was good mostly for humorous tension-relief. Then they turned on their sort-of-ally (more like Frenemy), the Soviet Union. Germany and the Soviet Union were slugging it out, and England was on the ropes, when in jumped America. D-Day, Battle of the Bulge, game over – America: 1, Nazi Germany: 0. The Soviet Union wanted Europe for themselves, but America said, "nope, not gonna happen fellas, hang on while we beat Japan with our other hand," then we got the atomic bomb. Communists and peaceniks stole our secrets and sold them to the Soviets because they hated America, and the rest is history. Bottom line: Britain? Weak. France? Super weak. Italy? Worse than France! Japan? Sneaky, mostly. Russia? Strong, but sneaky. Germany? Strong, but not as strong as America!

And America? Strongest of all. Just, and right, and boy did we take it to the Germans.

One of the other editors of this intellectual initiative, Mr. Carson, gave me a book for Christmas: *Kaputt*, by Curzio Malaparte, *nee* Kurt Erich Suckert, a northern Italian. While as a "memoir" it falls under biography / autobiography, it's the sort of memoir that can only be produced during a time of catastrophe. *Kaputt* describes Malaparte's time as an Italian Army officer / journalist on the Eastern Front – an absurd account of the violence that is so far as I can tell, both largely inaccurate and unique. Malaparte visits Romania, Ukraine, Poland and Finland and through almost-unbelievable access, bears witness to the horrors of war and governance of the Nazis. That in and of itself is remarkable, because access breeds familiarity, but in this case, it grants the author (and the reader) a perspective on the occupiers that is simultaneously individual and universal. Witness the scene (one of many) with Hans Frank, the Nazi Governor-General of Poland, when Frank attempts to convince Malaparte that the Axis mission is just by invoking his wife and her friends knitting in their parlor:

Frank's hand on my shoulder, though it was not heavy, oppressed me. Little by little, disentangling and considering each feeling that Frank aroused in me and attempting to understand and define the meaning, the pretexts and the reason for his every word and gesture, and trying to piece together a moral portrait of him out of the scraps that I had picked up about his character in the past few days, I became convinced that he was not to be judged summarily.

The uneasiness that I felt within me in his presence was born precisely because of the complexity of his character – a peculiar mixture of cruel intelligence, refinement, vulgarity, brutal cynicism and polished sensitiveness. There had to be a deep zone of darkness within him that I was still unable to explore – a dark region, an inaccessible hell from which dull, fleeting glows flashed unexpectedly, lighting his forbidding face – that disturbing and fascinating mysterious face.

The opinion I had formed of Frank long ago was, unquestionably, negative. I knew enough of him to detest him, but I felt honor-bound not to stop there. Of all the elements that I was conscious of in Frank, some a result of the experience of others and some of my own, something, I could not say what, was lacking – something the very nature of which was not known to me but which I expected would suddenly be revealed to me at any moment.

I hoped to catch a gesture, a word, an involuntary action that might reveal to me Frank's real face, his inner face, that would suddenly break away from the dark, deep region of his mind where, I instinctively felt, the roots of his cruel intelligence and musical sensitiveness were anchored in a morbid and, in a certain sense, criminal subsoil of character.

"This is Poland – an honest German home," repeated Frank, embracing in a single glance that middle-class scene of domestic simplicity.

Readers receive the usual evaluation of a prominent Nazi leader – that of the thug, the brute – but that is only the jumping-off point for a more careful and scathing indictment, which is to say, the suggestion that the thing that makes Nazi Germany spectacular and special is its specifically middle-class sensibility. In other words – to the British, German, or American reader – the Nazis are like us.

It's an astonishing book by an extraordinary man, who has been largely ignored by American history, likely for the reason stated above. Malaparte seems to have gotten a bad reputation for his involvement in the Italian fascist party, and, as a human, seems also to have been both a fanatical social climber, as well as a flamboyant intellectual. For all his political and moral failings, though, it's important to recognize that he spent 5 years in exile for publishing defamatory remarks public statements about Mussolini and Hitler, then was imprisoned for similar anti-fascist/Nazi activity in 1938, 39, 41, and 43. He was a valorously decorated combat veteran of World War I, which means something, especially considering his service with Italy's premiere infantry unit of the time, the Alpini.

Kaputt details the final destruction of a dying world order. We remember World War I as having swept away much of Europe's prevailing social climate, and shows like Downton Abbey catalogue how that played out in Great Britain. There's some truth to that recollection of history – the aftermath of WWI saw the beginning of Soviet (not Communist) Russia, and there were greater "rights" enunciated to women, as well as expanded economic opportunities for the lower and middle-class in non-communist societies (mostly through human space created by war casualties and the Spanish Influenza rather than human altruism) – but the events that were set in motion during World War I accelerated after the fall of Tsarist Russia and the ascension of the Soviet Union. By the time the Nazis swept into power and through Poland and France, the old social order

had been almost entirely eviscerated. Malaparte bears witness to this destruction on landscapes that are unfamiliar to most Western readers, and many Eastern European readers as well. *Kaputt* is full of surreal images of the horrors of war – it is a read unlike anything else one will encounter on the subject of World War II. Two quick examples:

Mad with terror, the horses of the Soviet artillery – there were almost a thousand of them – hurled themselves into the furnace and broke through the besieging flames and machine guns. Many perished within the flames, but most of them succeeded in reaching the shores of the lake and threw themselves into the water…while still madly struggling, the ice gripped them. The north wind swooped down during the night… Suddenly, with the peculiar vibrating noise of breaking glass, the water froze. The heat balance was broken, and the sea, the lakes, the rivers froze. In such instances, even sea waves are gripped in mid-air and become rounded ice waves suspended in the void. On the following day, when the first [Finnish] Ranger patrols, their hair singed, their faces blackened by smoke, cautiously stepped over the warm ashes in the charred forest and reached the lakeshore, a horrible and amazing sight met their eyes. The lake looked like a vast sheet of white marble on which rested hundreds upon hundreds of horses' heads. They appeared to have been chopped off cleanly with an ax. Only the heads stuck out of the crust of ice. And they were all facing the shore. The white flame of terror still burnt in their wide-open eyes. Close to the shore a tangle of wildly rearing horses rose from the prison of ice.

and this account of what a German Lieutenant Colonel did upon taking a Ukrainian boy-partisan prisoner, as told to a German princess and one of her aristocratic friends:

Finally the officer stopped before the boy, stared at him for a long time in silence, then said in a slow tired voice full of boredom: "Listen, I don't want to hurt you. You are a child, and I am not waging war against children. You have

fired at my men, but I am not waging war on children. Lieber Gott, I am not the one who invented war." The officer broke off, then went on in a strangely gentle voice: "Listen, I have one glass eye. It is difficult to tell which is the real one. If you can tell me at once, without thinking about it, which of the two is the glass eye, I will let you go free." "The left eye," replied the boy promptly. "How did you know?" "Because it is the one that has something human in it." …

"I met that officer again later at Soroca on the Dniester – a very serious man, a good father, but a true Prussian, a true Piffke as the Viennese say. He talked to me about his family, about his work. He was an electrical engineer. He also spoke about his son Rudolf, a boy ten years old. It was really difficult to tell the glass eye. He told me that the best glass eyes are made in Germany." "Stop it!" said Louise. "Every German has a glass eye," I said.

and a third, as though two weren't enough – in this, a very different view of German soldiers (circa 1941) from that of the typical "they were all fanatical criminals" so popular in literature, cinema, and plays (a canard that Malaparte disputes):

The German soldiers returning from the front line, when they reached the village squares, dropped their rifles on the ground in silence. They were coated from head to foot in black mud, their beards were long, their hollow eyes looked like the eyes of the sunflowers, blank and dull. The officers gazed at the soldiers and at the rifles lying on the ground, and kept silent. By then the lightning war, the "Blitzkrieg," was over, the "Dreizigjahrigerblitzkrieg," the thirty-year lighting war, had begun. The winning war was over, the losing war had begun. I saw the white stain of fear growing in the dull eyes of German officers and soldiers. I saw it spreading little by little, gnawing at the pupils, singeing the roots of the eyelashes and making the eyelashes drop one by one, like the long yellow eyelashes of the sunflowers. When Germans become

afraid, when that mysterious German fear begins to creep into their bones, they always arouse a special horror and pity. Their appearance is miserable, their cruelty sad, their courage silent and hopeless. That is when the Germans become wicked. I repented being a Christian. I felt ashamed of being a Christian.

Malaparte had unfettered access as an Italian journalist to the Eastern Front (when he wasn't in prison for mouthing off), and describes the events from the persective of someone who knows the war effort is doomed – far more interestingly though, are the ways in which he frames these stories, telling them, as it were, in a series of country clubs and aristocratic estates to the intellectual and social inheritors of the West's cultural legacy. Swedish, Spanish, German, Italian, and French aristocrats and diplomats. Polish princesses. The wealthy and powerful of another age, now, no longer so – some of whom, bound for the death camps. Malaparte catalogues an amazing history of loss, a way of life swept away forever. The British are largely absent, and come across when they are described as fairly pragmatic if not necessarily "good," and the Americans seem, if anything, to be parvenues – in this sense, *Kaputt* could almost be a companion piece for Henry James's earlier work – the reflection of American ambition for social weight in Europe, viewed through the prism of a massive class war.

Malaparte's writing is powerful and moving, and despite his politics, it's difficult to see how this book would not have had a stronger and more sympathetic reception in the West, save for its fundamental conceit: wealth and strength cannot keep you safe during times of war and true social tempest. There is no shelter from that storm, nothing counts in the end save the raw instinct for survival. This sort of morality tale is unwelcome in the capitalist West – this is not the sort of book anyone with property in the Hamptons would like to read, though I would argue that it is the clearest depiction of the

horror of war that I have read, cleaner even than Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*, and certainly far better than any of the "realist" portrayals of wartime (O'Brien, Marlantes, etc) who end up sentimentalizing and therefore implicitly endorsing war, which means they couldn't have thought very well about the experience even if they wrote effectively about it.

Malaparte becomes increasingly more sympathetic to the Soviets over the course of the book, an emotional and sentimental desire to see them as better or more than the Germans in part because they have beaten the Germans, and in part because of the horror the Germans have themselves inflicted, a fact that Malaparte observes firsthand on several occasions. This is interesting as well because the natural evolution of thinking for most in the West is a growing concern that the Soviets will simply replace Nazi Germany – in fact, in terms of history, the Soviets ultimately eclipsed the Nazis as a totem of fear when they acquired the atomic bomb, and became the first non-Western country with the ability to destroy the world. Despite the recent example of the war or perhaps because of it, many German and Italian intellectuals made up their minds to stick with moderates and capitalism after the collapse of Nazi Germany – more of them sided with the Totalitarian Soviets based on a sense that there was something in Communism, and to this day, European communism retains a small but important political presence, often derided in England and America. Malaparte's viewpoint is, therefore, especially interesting considering his various positions before and during World War II.

The Land of the Balaklava

> *“Theirs not to make reply, theirs not to reason why, theirs but to do and die: Into the valley of Death rode the six hundred.”*

These are lines from Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s poem “The Charge of the Light Brigade” about the British cavalry charge in the 1854 Battle of Balaklava during the Crimean War. That war was fought by the Russian Empire to expand its influence into the Black Sea and the lands surrounding it. The moribund Ottoman Empire opposed Russia’s expansion into its “sphere of influence”, and was supported in the war by the British Empire, which wanted to stop Russian naval expansion into the Mediterranean, the French Empire, which wanted to protect Catholic influence in the Holy Land and to gain “prestige” for France and its leader Napoleon III, and the Kingdom of Piedmont, which wanted to gain influence at the bargaining table with France for the establishment of a future unified Italy (which happened four years after this war). For the sake of these many empires, over half a million lives were lost in battle and many more civilian lives were destroyed. The Crimean War, often forgotten, was in fact a hugely important conflict that still has very real consequences today. In many ways it was also the first modern war: the telegraph, railway, and explosive naval shells were first used in war; the field of professional nursing developed on the battlefields from the work of Florence Nightingale and Mary Seacole; arguably the first war correspondence was written by Leo Tolstoy in his *Sevastapol Sketches*, which informed his later masterpiece *War and Peace* as well as his pacifism. The shuffling of borders and alliances during this war ended the post-Waterloo “concert of Europe” and stirred up romantic sentiments of nationalism, both of which helped lead directly to the First World War.

> Armed servicemen stand near Russian army vehicles outside a Ukrainian border guard post in the Crimean town of Balaclava March 1, 2014. Russian President Vladimir Putin secured his parliament's authority on Saturday to invade Ukraine after troops seized control of the Crimea peninsula and pro-Moscow demonstrators hoisted flags above government buildings in two eastern cities. REUTERS/Baz Ratner (UKRAINE – Tags: MILITARY POLITICS CIVIL UNREST)

The immediate result of the Crimean War was that Russian imperialism was temporarily checked, but by no means stopped permanently. Russia today is the largest country in the world by far, which is the result of a long and aggressive history of expansion and imperialism that began with Peter the Great and seems to continue today albeit on a smaller scale under Vladimir Putin. The large Crimean peninsula was home to Greek settlers thousands of years ago, and was later settled by Turkic tribes moving west towards Europe. The Tatars, one of these tribes, fought against Russia for centuries and were the majority population of the Crimea until they were forcibly relocated to Uzbekistan by Josef Stalin and replaced by Russian speakers. The possession of Crimea within the Soviet Union was shifted from Russia to Ukraine during the Khrushchev regime in 1954, and this possession was secured by permanent treaty between Russia and Ukraine after the breakup of the Soviet Union. Unreconstructed Russian imperialists and nationalists never forgot that this land seized by force 100 years earlier should somehow be theirs by rights, and the rise of Putin has signaled the return to a revanchist Russian foreign policy. Putin has gradually worked towards his long-term aim over the past 15 years: secure strategic areas

bordering Russia that have friendly Russian-speaking populations, thus maintaining buffer states around Russia that are friendly or at worst neutral. Putin built his reputation around brutally subduing Chechnya and generally never backing down from tough rhetoric backed up by armed force when necessary. When Georgia looked west and considered joining NATO it was promptly invaded and squelched, and had two independent regions wrested from its authority that are currently unrecognized by any nation other than Russia. It is worth mentioning that the last time Russian tanks rolled into Georgia was 2007 at the tail end of the Bush administration, which even as the lamest of ducks did not see fit to intervene in this unwarranted use of force for fear of provoking Russia. Another place where Russia used its strong arm and maintains military presence is the sliver of Moldova east of the Dniester River called Transnistria; sandwiched between Moldova and Ukraine it does not even border Russia proper, but its citizens speak mostly Russian instead of Romanian.

The Ukraine, on the other hand, is a large and important state dominated by Russia since the Napoleonic wars which closely shares a culture, history, and language with Russia. Indeed, the first Russians actually came to power in 13th century Kiev before moving east to Vladimir and later Moscow. When Ukraine became independent in 1991 for the first time in centuries, the country was divided into two main camps: those who wanted to stay closely aligned with Russia, mostly in the eastern provinces, and those who wanted a more western and liberal government, in Kiev and the western provinces. From 2004 to the present, the two groups traded power mostly between the presidencies of Victor Yanukovych (the Russian-friendly party) and Yulia Tymoshenko (the west-leaning party). Eventually Yanukovych fled the country and abandoned his post of president in 2014 during a protest movement against his corrupt regime and his move away from the European Union in favor of Russia. Putin, left without his political ally in charge of Ukraine, set in motion a plan to take Crimea by

force and gradually send enough men and arms to the eastern provinces to effectively establish an “independent,” Russian-friendly state there as well. Everything went according to plan when Russian soldiers suddenly took control of bases and infrastructure across Crimea, followed by a dubious referendum that showed Crimean residents voted in favor of Russian annexation. Things are not going as smoothly in the eastern regions of Ukraine where fighting between separatist rebels and the federal government has continued unabated for over a year. Putin continues to maintain the most transparent denial ever in saying that Russia is not supporting the rebels.

Like the cardigan, named after the British general who led the Charge of the Light Brigade, another garment derived its name from the Crimean War—the balaclava. This black cloth cap which covers the entire head except for the eyes and mouth has been a staple of cold weather troops and bank robbers ever since its namesake 1854 battle. Most recently, it has been seen on the “unmarked” soldiers who appeared suddenly in great numbers to secure Crimea’s government buildings and Russian military bases. Likewise for the groups of organized rebels using advanced weaponry against the Ukrainian government in the east of the country, where there have been daily reports of military equipment and personnel convoying in from Russia. Even after a civilian airplane was shot out of the sky causing European countries to begin sanctions against Russia, Putin’s resolve to arm and support the rebels has been unwavering. Western countries easily condemn the conflict and Russia’s part in it, but Putin knows they are not willing to go further than a few economic sanctions—a mere slap on the wrist compared to the prestige in his homeland of bringing historic Russian lands back into the fold. What Putin could not expect is the drastic drop in oil prices, which has depleted Russia’s substantial monetary reserves and will eventually cause a full-scale crisis in Russia when the government funding for bread and circuses dry up (bread, in this case, representing subsidized food, and circuses representing either

the Sochi Olympics, the image of their president as the most macho man in the world, or the sad tradition of cheap vodka and alcoholism). Putin's power and popularity are due to fully exploiting Russia's vast natural reserves, including oil and gas, at the expense of any other development of his country. This is a much bigger threat to Putin's one-dimensional authoritarian regime, and Russia's economy, than the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, especially considering that the ongoing conflict is draining Russia's coffers at the same time as its main source of income is drying up and its currency is collapsing.

There has recently been a temporary ceasefire agreed to by Ukraine and Russia, mediated admirably by France and Germany. This does not mean that hostilities will not continue by the "independent" rebels anyway, or that Putin will not use this to his advantage to further cement his gains in eastern Ukraine. In fact, only days after the "ceasefire" there were reports of more arms and equipment moving across the border, more shelling in disputed towns, and even possibly some artillery fired from inside Russia. This means either that Putin has no control or influence over the rebels, or, more likely, that he is just playing for time and hoping that a formal truce will earn him support within a divided European Union. There are calls by America and some European countries to arm Ukraine and give more substantial military support. This is a bad idea and will only escalate a conflict which has already been long and violent and destructive enough. Ukraine could never compete with Russia militarily even with some extra help from America, and will further only give more excuse for Putin to drop his shabby alibi and move Russian units and arms into Ukraine more openly. It would also feed into his rhetoric about the West meddling in "Russia's sphere of influence". Stephen Walt has written a convinced article along these lines here. Let's not forget that wherever America sends weapons to influence its favored outcome, trouble surely follows and the problem inevitably becomes much larger than it

was at the start (Afghanistan of the 1980s is only one of many such examples). Instead, America and Europe should continue the economic and diplomatic pressure on Russia in lieu of reaching a more permanent pragmatic agreement that can end the bloodshed. Russia, despite the carefully crafted image and blunder of Putin, is a weak and declining country—the kind that often has the least to lose during the heated days before a local conflict becomes a greater regional or world war.

America and Europe should also give further economic aid to Ukraine and help build up their institutions as far as possible, not necessarily to be a future NATO member (the thing that most infuriated Putin in the first place, and rightfully so), but to avoid being a large failed state at their doorstep. It obviously does not set a good precedent to let countries invade others, even when done with "unconventional forces", and to change borders at will, but in some cases it can be the best outcome from a bad situation. Frankly, it is not worth the escalation of a bigger European war against a paranoid, desperate, and declining country which also happens to have the most nuclear weapons in the world just to support a losing cause against some impoverished eastern regions of Ukraine that have always been happier being considered Russian than Ukrainian. For those that think that anything less than full armed intervention equates with appeasement, a la Germany in the Sudetenland, I would tell you that not everything is comparable with the Third Reich, and more weapons and tension do not automatically improve violent situations where power and prestige are at stake—history bears this out whether it be imperialists and war-mongerers from the past or opportunistic autocrats of the present like Putin. In this case, as usual, the best hope for a peaceful resolution is continued dialogue and increased economic aid for Ukraine and Russia's other neighbors, and the best prospect for stopping Russian imperialism is not on the battlefield but with a patient economic and diplomatic approach. Since the first Crimean War, many things have changed, but many

other things have stayed the same. Another line from Tennyson’s poem reads “someone had blundered”, which is something that can be said about every war in history (including several of America’s own recent adventures). Sending more soldiers and arms to die in this valley of death in the name of prestige, power, and spheres of influence is bound to fail—let’s at least try to avoid a blunder this time.