


# The of War Putin's Imagination



I can't stop looking at photographs taken in Ukraine during these unending days of war, a war so unthinkable that it's still hard to believe in the reality of what is happening. The streets of Kharkiv—rubble, concrete beams, black holes where windows should be, the outlines of beautiful buildings with their insides burnt away. A station, a crowd of refugees trying to board a departing train. A woman carrying a dog, rushing to get to a shelter in Kyiv before the shelling begins. Bombed houses in Sumy. A maternity hospital in Mariupol after a raid—this I will not describe.

An 80-year-old friend told me of a dream she'd once had: a huge field filled with people lying in rows of iron beds. Rows and rows of people. And rising from this field, the sound of moaning. I always knew, she said, that this was to be expected. It would come to pass.

Dreams about catastrophe are common in what was once called the "post-Soviet world"; other names will surely appear soon. And in these recent days and nights, the dreams have become reality, a reality more fearful than we ever thought possible, made of aggression and violence, an evil that speaks in the Russian language. As someone wrote on a social media site: "I dreamt we were occupied by Nazis, and that those Nazis were us."

The word "Nazi" is one of the most frequently used in the political language of the Russian state. Speeches by Vladimir Putin and propaganda headlines often use the word to describe an enemy that they say has infiltrated Ukraine. This enemy is so strong that it can and must be resisted with military aggression: the bombing of residential areas, the destruction of the flesh of towns and villages, the living tissue of human fates.

The word still horrifies us, and in our world there are certainly candidates for its application. But propagandists use the word like the black spot in *Treasure Island*, sticking it wherever it suits them. If you call your opponent a Nazi, that explains and justifies all and any means. The means in this war

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have been carefully calculated. The army, usually spoken of as modern, technological and highly effective, is using tactics that could have been borrowed from old war films. Any war is terrible, repugnant, but this one seems in another league: the tank units stretched along roads, the bombing raids, the residential districts turned into ruins—everything that we're watching on screens and that those in Ukraine are watching in real life. It all looks like some hideous reconstruction, a film set into which live rounds are fired, with real people as the targets.

This is something new and very far from being a pragmatic military operation; yet at the same time it is incredibly anachronistic—a 20th-century war shifted into the frame of the 21st century. We watch in real time, trembling in our shame and grief that this is happening here and now: once again, someone wants to arrange the world as he sees fit, without any regard to what humanity thinks about this. The use of violence as a decisive argument in any discussion of the future places that future under threat—and what is happening now

in Ukraine (and Russia and Belarus, both of which have long since become the hostages of their rulers) has implications for every one of us.

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**What we are living through** might be termed the death of the conceivable. Over many decades, the western imagination (across many genres and forms, from high literature to Hollywood and television series) has used the industry of the imagination as a sort of training ground for experience. Fearful dystopian scenarios are played out, tested for accuracy, and thereby become normalized and safe, like films about zombies and aliens. After all, they're just inventions! Total surveillance, the war of the powerful against the weak, ecological catastrophes—all come to pass in the guise of the artistic experiment: yes, this scenario is impossible in real life, but let's play it through to see how it might work out.

Having to accept that the unthinkable, what we have rejected from the collective imagination as both impossible and impermissible, could actually come to pass on an

unremarkable winter's morning would be a catastrophe. It destroys all our notions of the contemporary world and a social contract that recognizes the need for mutual understanding, empathy, common sense (and a certain skepticism toward alarmist pronouncements). But today all this has come to pass and we are standing among the ruins.

The aggressor in this unjust war in a foreign territory, with its war crimes and its victims (who already number in the millions if we include not just the casualties but those who are left homeless, without loved ones, without a future), operates as if he's making a piece of art, a book or a film, in which the events are controlled by their creator. But this particular book has a bad author. Bad in all senses, as a person and as a writer with scant interest in his own characters. He doesn't care if they survive or die; he doesn't care what their needs or desires are; and he's definitely not interested in recognizing their freedoms.

The only thing that he cares about is his own authorship, the affirmation of his will, and his control of the text and events. This is what is occupying Putin at this moment: the enactment of his personal will, the attempt to rewrite the history of Ukraine and Europe, to change our present and determine our future. He plans to draw Ukraine, Russia, Europe, the world (and everyone who is constantly refreshing the live news) into the appalling book he has himself written. He believes that from now on we will exist only within his book; he wants to be our author, our screenwriter, the one who knows how to change our lives for the better. But now the results of his handiwork are clear for all to see.

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## The only thing that Putin cares about is his own authorship ... and his control of the text and events.

You could say that this is the essence of every dictatorship and the logic of every dictator—the need to assert his own solipsism, a sense of the living populated world as a still-life painting, a *nature morte*, in which the meek china plates on the table won't scream out if you smash them. But to my mind this is a special case: there is, behind the movement of Russian military vehicles, a genuine fear of the existence of an Other, a desperate desire to crush this Other, to reform it, ingest it, draw it in, gulp it down, swallow it.

C. S. Lewis describes something similar in *The Screwtape Letters*: the demons feed on human suffering and despair, and their own brotherly love is expressed as a desire to eat their younger brethren. Whenever I hear Russian politicians explaining that the fraternal Ukrainian nation simply needs to be taught a bit of common sense, I smell a distinct whiff of sulfur.

Putin is waging war in Ukraine with the unwavering fury of a man who has his own scores to settle, who is ready to do anything to win; to win, not as countries win conflicts in an age of nuclear nonproliferation, through negotiation, treaties and

compromise, but as if everything that had significance for him was merely a script, lovingly devised and with a clear compensatory aim.

Ukraine must be humiliated, it must lose all the attributes of an independent sovereign state, from its legitimately elected government (its “denazification”) to its army (the country must be demilitarized). It must give up its territorial claims to Donbas and Crimea. But even that is not enough. Even before any process of negotiation, Ukraine must be ritually punished, publicly, openly, in front of a live audience; it must be forced to its knees, made an example of, so that its residents and anyone else watching see what happens to those who don't submit.

The cruelty of this war is inexplicable if you don't take into account what you might call this “educational” aspect. If Europe is home, then Putin wants to show who is master in this home. Destroyed towns and ruined lives are a visual aid, a long-term reminder. But there is also another aspect to this, and it seems important to me.

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**The events of today are occurring in a symbolic space, just as irrevocably as they are occurring physically in the fields and bomb shelters of Ukraine.** Ukraine today is the arena of an ancient battle between good and evil, however grandiose that might sound; its outcome affects every one of us, not just Ukraine and Russia.

Evil is an old-fashioned concept. The postwar decades have taught us to see things automatically from the perspective of our opponent in order to establish understanding, compromise and dialogue. But sometimes there is



no one to speak with—in the place of an interlocutor there is only impenetrable darkness, and it insists on its own outcome at any cost.

Right now a decision is being made about the sort of world we will live in and, in some ways, have already been sucked into: we exist and act in the black hole of another's consciousness. It calls up archaic ideas of nationhood: that there are worse nations, better ones, nations that are higher or lower on some incomprehensible scale of greatness; that all Ukrainians (or Jews, Russians, Americans and so on) are weak, greedy, servile, hostile—and these cardboard cutouts are already promenading through the collective imagination, just as they were before the Second World War. As they say in Russia, “the dead take hold of the living,” and here these dead are ideas and concepts into which new blood flows and they begin killing, just as in a horror film.

Time returns obediently into that stifling past that so filled our nights with horrors. One of the first tasks of the “military operation” was to turn the clock back eight years, to return Ukraine to the state in which

the Kremlin would like to preserve it forever. Viktor Yanukovich is taken out of the trunk in the attic, only slightly moldy, ready to be placed on the presidential throne as if he had never left it, and the Maidan protests and eight years of democratic freedom simply fade like a dream.

War in the 21st century imitates the 20th century, wants to return to an age of wholesale massacre and monstrous historical experiments. Now it is inseparable from a fashionable dependence on the image—but on our screens all we see are the deep tombs of the past. Resisting today means freeing ourselves from the dictatorship of another's imagination, from a picture of the world that grasps us from inside and takes hold of our dreams, our days, our timelines, whether we want it or not. A battle for survival is going on right now in Ukraine; a battle for the independence of one's own rational mind. It is going on in every house and in every head. Here as well as there, we must resist.

Yesterday I wanted to send birthday greetings to a friend. I wrote, as I often write in such circumstances,

**I'm writing this in Russian and with every sentence it gets harder. ... The language isn't to blame, just as the earth isn't. But it has changed, it is rutted and cratered.**

“ura!” I stopped. A bad word, with military associations.

“Everything is burning and smoking” is an idiom we use to mean there’s a lot going on, that you can’t manage all your tasks at once. But now that phrase is impossible. Things are burning and smoking, but not here.

There was a proverb I used to like: “a soldier would never hurt a child”—a phrase you could use to suggest that everything would be OK, we’ll find a way. The proverb has vanished: now we read about soldiers and children in publications that are forbidden in Russia, via a virtual private network.

I’m writing this in Russian and with every sentence it gets harder. The ridge of language, its living conversational edge, changes first. It’s like an ancient minefield, and the old mines begin exploding as you pick your way across. They are all live now, these mines. The language isn’t to blame, just as the earth isn’t. But it has changed, it is rutted and cratered. And the craters will only grow in number. ■

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