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Puppeteer Putin

Abstract:

In this essay, the author regards the individual as the chief courier of History, and Mr. Putin, the immediate cause of Russia's invasion of Ukraine – distinguishing his agency from broad precipitating socio-historical causes that deny inwardness, individuality, and free-will. A dark puppeteer, Mr. Putin is more sinister than Plato's puppeteers (*Allegory of the Cave*). This invasion raises at least three questions: (1) Why has the west not responded as much to other recent non-western wars and genocides? Why have Europe's former colonies not protested Russia more vigorously? (2) Why do armed forces obey cultishly, the commands of autocratic heads of state? (3) How do we prevent autocrats from occupying positions of power? Western hedonism and Putin's puritanism are opposites that cannot resolve one another. Moreover, Ukraine reminds us that non-violence, patriotism, defiance – even war – cannot be moral absolutes. Depending on the context, they are good, evil, or something in between.

Keywords:

Russia, Ukraine, Putin, dark puppeteer, Plato, revanchist, free-will

Erratum (April 30th, 2023): *Due to an editorial error, the previously published version of this paper contained some unauthorized proofreading interventions to the text.*

The twentieth-century was historically unique – bringing great progress in science and technology – but also the killing fields of wars, revolutions, and genocides, caused, in part, by the anomie unleashed by the same scientific progress that delivered material prosperity. The twenty-first century, we thought, would be different. Expecting the Pendulum of History to swing to the opposite extreme, war, we thought would become obso-

lete.¹ If nothing else, our global stockpile of nuclear weapons would deter war. At this threshold of the new century, imperialistic unjust wars, we thought, were outmoded.

Needless to say, we were wrong. In the current macro-cycle of History, war appears endemic to human nature. As a result, perpetual war seems more likely than perpetual peace. At least two broad genres of war continue to prevail – those that are identity-laden (sometimes revanchist in nature) and those that are profit-driven. Thanks to technology, war today has global impact, but also fetches swift global opprobrium.

Modernity's apparent flight from the life-saving ascetic norms that curb the passions has opened the door to the temptations of mature capitalism, thus heightening our will-to-war, which arises from the passions.² A dark trinity therefore haunts modernity – namely, materialism-militarism-concupiscence. Yet, the west appears to have lost touch with the horrors of war – perhaps because so many of its post-WW II wars were fought in “third world” countries. If in 2022 Mr. Putin affronted western sensibilities – this is because of the *type* of war he waged (a revanchist invasion), and his specific target – Ukraine, a sovereign *western* nation, and a functioning democracy – not because he waged war as such. Had he targeted an undemocratic “third world” country, the west would have perhaps turned a blind eye.

In this essay, we return to the individual as the chief courier of History. Regarding Mr. Putin as the immediate cause of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, we distinguish his agency from broad precipitating sociohistorical causes that deny inwardness, individuality, and free-will. More sinister than Plato's puppeteers in his *Allegory of the Cave*, Mr. Putin's machinations are devoid of even the trace of reality and truth inherent in shadows on a cave wall. Manifesting a diabolical will-to-power, his fratricidal invasion of Ukraine is among the most unjust and uncivilized of wars, notwithstanding his hypocritical revanchist justifications. His intention of regime change is a colonial desire to obliterate the being of this sovereign nation, converting it to an inferior clone of Russia. However, Mr. Putin is also a sign of the times. Notwithstanding his free-will, he is not only a dark puppeteer, but also a puppet of History.

1) In this essay, upper case letters are used for some words (like Truth, History, etc.) for honorific emphasis and literary effect.

2) Applying “modernity” or “late modernity” to the contemporary west is problematic even if envisaged in Foucauldian terms, “as an attitude than as a period of history” – that is, as a set of worldviews (each with its historical lineage) rather than as a period of history. The west is no longer modern in the literal historical sense of the term. For, as Habermas cites, “Modernism is dominant but dead.” Moreover, “modernity” means something entirely different for Europe's former colonies, which suffered brutal western intrusions into their very different streams of history. Different civilizations experience different concurrent tracks of history. Thus, in the last century, while the west experienced “postmodern” consciousness, Europe's former colonies experienced a culmination of colonial and neocolonial historical forces that catapulted them into a new era, through contact with an alien, crisis-ridden, nihilistic, and dominating west that also bestowed the natural sciences and the scientific spirit. As a result, they experienced an *accelerated* history that combined “modern” with “postmodern” consciousness.

Moreover, the first two decades of the twenty-first century have witnessed even greater acceleration in world historical forces. We are caught in the maelstrom of tectonic historical shifts that are changing the world every day. This makes it yet more difficult to apply “modernity” to the contemporary west. To represent these fast-shifting worldviews that have beset the world since the start of this century, perhaps “post-postmodern” or Zavarzadeh's “metamodern” are more apt. Yet, insofar as historical forces are causally connected, “post-postmodern” or “metamodern,” and their precursors (“postmodern,” “late modern,” and “modern”), are related – with the prior lingering in the posterior. Moreover, all these eras are joint heirs of long-lasting historical strains from prior centuries that have forged the current west – and through colonialism and neo-colonialism, the current world. We are still suffering the aftermath of moral mistakes and nihilism from centuries ago.

But for the purposes of this essay, “post-postmodern” or “metamodern” becomes linguistically awkward when applied to our current global turpitude – and to western worldviews that have forged our world since the middle of the last century. In this essay, I use “modernity” and “modern” (instead of “post-postmodern” or “metamodern”) for the sake of literary ease. Using these terms, more in their global colloquial sense, than in their empirical-historical sense, I apply them to the worldwide fruition of past forces that are culminating at this extraordinary historical moment. Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?” 39; Habermas, “Modernity versus Postmodernity,” 6; Zavarzadeh, “The Apocalyptic Fact,” 69, 75.

This invasion raises at least three questions. First, why has the west not responded as much to non-western wars and genocides? Equally, why have Europe's former colonies not protested Mr. Putin more vigorously? This proves that despite our digital interconnectedness, the world still falls far short of true cosmopolitanism. Second, why do armed forces obey cultishly the commands of autocratic heads of state? Third, how do we prevent autocrats from occupying positions of power? Ukraine reminds us that nonviolence, patriotism, defiance – even war – cannot be moral absolutes. Depending on the context, they are good, evil, necessary evil – or a shade in between.

This essay, therefore, has three parts – (1) This Historical Moment, Revanchist Ambitions, Cosmopolitanism, and the Ascetic Norms; (2) Puppeteer Putin – Why the Individual Matters; and (3) Putin's Invasion – Three Questions.

This Historical Moment, Revanchist Ambitions, Cosmopolitanism, and the Ascetic Norms

To understand Mr. Putin's invasion of Ukraine, it helps to view our times metaphysically. The uncommon worldwide historical turbulence we witness today is unifying us at a more profound level than all trite globalisms put together. Notwithstanding our recoiling nationalism, we remain global in our conjoined historical destiny and purpose – caught in the maelstrom of a concentrated “now” that is raking the collective consciousness, shoring up the multiple crises of modernity. Of these, some are individuated and inward, while others are collective and outward. Modernity culminates inwardly in the retching soul and outwardly in multiple crises – descent into the body, materialism, a consequent climate crisis, the hi-tech war, and so forth. We can plumb the depths of the ocean and explore outer space, but remain famished of inwardness and wisdom, subject to addictions, and addicted to therapy. Portending tectonic shifts, this extraordinary historical moment is purging us of hidden iniquities, by exposing and dredging them – making them rise to the surface, like scum floating on water. One sign of this purgation – whose larger purpose is to prepare us for the next historical age – is the worldwide turbulence we witness today. A cusp between two macro-cycles of History, this moment is a witness to the Locomotive of History, as it pulls out of what may loosely be called “modernity,” to thrust us forward towards a Golden Age of Truth, for which, we have no formal name as yet. A form of purgation, our current historical turpitude is preparing us for the next macro-cycle of History.

Moreover, we are witnessing a second historical phenomenon – namely, the Pendulum of History, as it swings away from hedonism towards puritanism (its nemesis). Purging the world of ideologies that detract from Conscience, the Great Spirit of History tends to wash away departures from Truth – repudiating ideologies that provoke reactions because they compromise Truth. But because History is part divine, part human – expressing the conjoint will of God and man – it cannot eradicate *all* wayward ideologies, but swings to their counter-ideologies. As a result, the Pendulum of History swings from extreme to extreme in its sempiternal evasions of balance.

Of the iniquities we are being purged of, Mr. Putin uses two in his invasion of Ukraine – namely, war-mongering and revanchist ideologies. Although universal enough to be endemic to human nature, both are novel in their modern expressions. Mr. Putin is hardly unique. We see war-mongering *and* revanchism in the People's Republic of China's (PRC's) 1950–1951 invasion of Tibet and revanchist ambitions in the Hindu nationalist ideal of “Akhand Bharat” (undivided India). But to those who think western civilization has overcome revanchism, Mr. Putin remains unique.

What does revanchism mean? At the very least it means abusing history to satiate a nostalgic hankering for the infeasible – a return to a mythic past lost in the mists of time. Modernity is particularly conducive to revanchist escapism. Although its historical purpose is to carve an “I” out of the “we,” stripping it of family and community, thus making it rootless – yet modernity also robs the “I” through deracinating ontological losses

that dilute the self. Already isolated in a society milling with atomized individuals, the “I” suffers further ontological loss, when the terrible worldliness of the world hollows it out to forge the retching soul characteristic of modernity. When wrapped in “wokeism,” with politics replacing religion, modernity causes further ontological loss – by creating a synthetic-syncretic “we” through a new tribalism, comprising myriad protest identities and perspectives rooted in political causes. Given its historically unprecedented descent into the body, and haunted by the ominous sprite of materialism-militarism-concupiscence, modernity makes us long for the abiding “we” of the mythic traditional community, wherein the individual reposed, as if in a cocoon of History. The purpose of modernity is to awaken us out of the slumber of this traditional “we,” to the individuality that Conscience presupposes. It is therefore not uncommon for modern man, a historical Luddite, to entertain revanchist delusions, so he can escape the inhospitable age he is embedded in.

Bereft of a moral compass and hence, delusional, the revanchist becomes imperial, when he invades sovereign nations to force them to join his own – all for the sake of returning to the civilizational glory of a mystified past. Narcissistic in the extreme, revanchist ideologies are always devoid of Conscience. Seeking a long lost authenticity through territorial ambitions, they manifest the most dangerous aspects of identity politics. In the end, they express a rogue will-to-power, which springs from a bloated ego that signifies evil and opposes goodness.

What opposes revanchism and its surging will-to-power? The answer lies in true cosmopolitanism. Where the revanchist destroys the universal, drowning it in the particular, which he pollutes through inordinate nativism – cosmopolitanism harmonizes myriad forms of the particular *through* the universal. Where revanchist aspirations arise from selfishness, cosmopolitanism arises from unselfishness and its chief consequence – immeasurable empathy. Moreover, where a revanchist is delusional – not only with respect to external objectivity, but also with respect to himself – the true cosmopolitan loses her ego in the universal, thus attaining a piercing objectivity that culminates in omniscience. Entirely antithetical to genuine cosmopolitanism, revanchism destroys the self *and* the other. Having lost sight of the quest for true self-knowledge, and delusional in his unbridled subjectivity, the revanchist drowns in an abyss of egotism, entertaining delusions of grandeur, and seeing himself as the messianic essence of his nation or people.

One sign of cosmopolitanism is the capacity for being universal, without relinquishing the particular that makes us unique amidst universality. At its highest, cosmopolitanism means being rooted in the divine One. As a result, we feel at home in the cosmos and in all incidental identities (nation, community, etc.), which we express with love and compassion. Above all, this divine rootedness means *being* the being of every being, or the highest empathy that expresses itself as a feeling of oneness with all beings.

The revanchist’s greatest enemy and antithesis is the saint who loses her ego in the hallowed state of *unio mystica*. Qualifying as the heart, essence, and soul of not only her own people, but of the universal – she is the greatest ever cosmopolitan in the rarefied numinous sense of always feeling at home everywhere in the cosmos. Rooted in the particular, yet fully established in the universal, she becomes the essence of all beings – through the boundless empathy that makes her *be* the being of every being. Transcending the subject-object boundary to connect and commune with all living beings, the saint trembles with empathy – sublimating all otherness through the highest consecrated Love she draws from the wellspring of Love, which is the divine One. The revanchist aspires for the same, but in the opposite direction – by pursuing power to destroy, dominate, and “unify” alien others through violence – alienating himself wholly from every living being and amplifying otherness through a dark oneness.

Thus, in 2021, when Mr. Putin said that Russians and Ukrainians are *one* people, sharing the same “historical and spiritual space” – did he mean the highest empathetic oneness, or, the dark oneness of coerced unification? Indeed, what he has demonstrated in his 2022 invasion of Ukraine is a revanchist-imperialistic devouring of the necessary otherness between Russia and Ukraine – a dark brooding unity that opposes the

luminous oneness that comes from sublimating otherness through empathetic love. Referring to several historical reasons for this purported oneness, he said:

During the recent Direct Line, when I was asked about Russian-Ukrainian relations, I said that Russians and Ukrainians were one people – a single whole. These words were not driven by some short-term considerations or prompted by the current political context. It is what I have said on numerous occasions and what I firmly believe. ... First of all, I would like to emphasize that the wall that has emerged in recent years between Russia and Ukraine, between the parts of what is essentially the same historical and spiritual space, to my mind is our great common misfortune and tragedy. These are, first and foremost, the consequences of our own mistakes made at different periods of time. But these are also the result of deliberate efforts by those forces that have always sought to undermine our unity.³

Revanchist ideologies are a significant cause of war. But the universal root cause of modern war-mongering is perhaps modernity's foremost essence – namely, its flight from overt forms of the perennial life-saving ascetic norms (self-control, otherworldliness, chastity, and renunciation). In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle flanks each moral virtue, which he understands as a mean state, by two associated vices (a qualitative excess and deficit).⁴ Moreover, “sometimes an extreme bears a certain resemblance to a mean”⁵ – meaning, one of the two vices (excess or deficit) will resemble the virtue. Applying Aristotle, and treating the ascetic norms as a collective moral virtue, we may conclude that they are flanked by two corresponding vices – hedonism (excess vice), and puritanism (deficit vice). Of the two, puritanism caricatures the ascetic norms, even as it resembles them superficially.

As the virtues that hoist man to the summit of the great chain of being – helping him overcome worldliness and his ego, thus serving a salvific purpose – the ascetic norms are essentially soteriological in character. They are therefore *perennial*. When they disappear in their overt forms, they reappear in covert forms. Today, the ascetic norms are concealed in righteous expressions of political causes that protest bodily prejudices and inordinate materialism.

Our flight from the overt ascetic norms has caused several soul-searing crises (inner and outer) – from descent into the body and destruction of the family and community, to the iconic stature of money and the millionaire, and the myriad addictions that afflict modern man. As a result, we have lost contact with Conscience and its objective ethics, declining, instead, into the black hole of moral relativism and its subjective ethics – thus drowning in the raging eddies of ideologies that seek, in vain, to supplant Conscience.

Moreover, these subjective ideologies divide us into two warring camps – namely, puritanism (usually religious) and hedonism (whether progressive or capitalistic). First, puritanism opposes progressive hedonism through the mirror-opposites of the political right and the left respectively – with the right representing bodily puritanism and the left, hedonism. But second, religious puritanism opposes hedonism through the resounding clash between Jihad and McWorld (representing the inordinate materialism of capitalism). Religion becomes puritanical and credulous when it loses faith, darkening itself further by repressing and policing *Eros*. Reverting to old injustices and prejudices against women and sexual minorities, religious puritanism distorts the ascetic norms it seeks to resemble in vain. But secular progressive political ideologies also darken themselves – through

3) Putin, “On the Historical Unity.”

4) Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 68.

5) Ibid., 72.

their soul-searing cynicism, which opposes credulity. Like puritanism and hedonism, credulity and cynicism are opposites that cannot resolve each other. Nevertheless, they share this similitude – both lack the hallowed faith and belief inherent in the perennial ascetic norms. If hedonism succumbs to the power of *Eros*, then puritanism polices *Eros* thus succumbing to the violence, which hedonists believe is inevitable, when desires are repressed. That Mr. Putin combines puritanism with limitless violence, should come as no surprise to the west, where puritanical conservatives yoke God with guns.⁶ Neither extreme (puritanism or hedonism) understands that the only way to reach the hallowed ascetic norms is through sublimation. Thus, the only way to resolve the seething tensions between puritanism and hedonism is to transcend both, by sublimating the passions and ascending directly to the true ascetic norms.

Puppeteer Putin – Why the Individual Matters

In the world of children, puppeteers use puppets to tell parables through illusion – using fiction to convey truth. But the dark puppeteer, a master manipulator, uses truth to convey falsehoods – by sugar-coating falsity with rhetorical truisms which he delivers through insincere speech. A consummate hypocrite, his inner falsehoods are more toxic than conscious overt lies. Using people cynically, as means to his ends, he derides the Kantian principle – that persons should never be treated as means to ends, but rather, as ends in themselves.⁷ Master manipulators also flout Gandhian ethics – of letting the moral quality of the means used determine that of the ends reached.⁸ Finally, although master manipulators justify means by ends, they flout even that which is the converse of Gandhian ethics – namely, consequentialist ethics, which seeks to let the moral quality of the ends determine that of the actions used to reach the ends.

The dark puppeteer selects ends based on desire and self-interest – not the moral quality of his ends. Willing to use any means whatsoever, with cynical disregard for their moral quality, he does not tie means with ends, except to select the most expedient means to reach the ends. Neither moral, nor utilitarian, his assessment of means and ends is unethically expedient, entirely self-centered, desire-laden, nihilistic, and cynical. Thirsting for power, he derides goodness. Having long lost touch with Conscience, and drowning in a cesspool of hypocrisy, he personifies the grating incongruity that severs who he is from what he says. Dark puppeteers often say the most sanctimonious things – with the worst motives.

Thus, Mr. Putin, an autocrat, has long spoken in support of democracy for Russia:

President Putin has spoken repeatedly about his commitment to democracy as the only way forward for Russia. He has rhetorically supported a free press, fewer but more potent political parties, an independent judiciary, and a vibrant civil society that can exert control over the state. At the same time, he has backed policies that increase the state's ability to restrict civil liberties and has sanctioned a government that has increasingly interfered in media and non-governmental organizations that it considers too critical of Putin's policies.⁹

Moreover, Mr. Putin, who has supported traditional family values, saying – “As far as ‘parent number 1’ and ‘parent number 2’ goes, I’ve already spoken publicly about this and I’ll repeat it again: as long as I’m president

6) Matthews, “Russia’s puritan revolution.”

7) Kant, *Groundwork*, 41.

8) Gandhi said, “As the means so the end” and “Impure means result in an impure end” – meaning, the means used determine the moral quality of the ends reached. Gandhi, *All Men Are Brothers*, 74, 76.

9) Bjorkman, “Russian Democracy.”

this will not happen. There will be dad and mum”¹⁰ – yet has had no compunctions letting his soldiers kill and maim Ukrainian children, even using them as human shields.¹¹ His defense of traditional family values – something a wistful west secretly longs for – becomes a puritanical political ploy against western hedonism.

Finally, hypocrisy reaches its peak when religious war-mongers sugar-coat violence with piety. Religion comes at multiple levels, with violence inevitable at lower ideological levels. We should not let blood-stained religious war-mongers (like Mr. Putin and former US president, George W. Bush) throw us into the abyss of cynicism that besmirches higher religiosity.¹² Indeed, nothing could be a greater travesty of the gentle Christ or the heart of Christianity, than the modern hi-tech war. The lower ideological level of religion, therefore, is something to beware of. That Mr. Putin (Russian Orthodox) and Mr. Bush (Methodist) both claim roots in Christianity, despite shedding blood, proves how dangerous religion becomes, when removed from the tripod it should always stand upon – ethics-wisdom-mysticism. Blood-stained religious war-mongers also prove that one must first be worthy of the prayer mat, through prior ethical conduct. Finally, they prove that premature religiosity (without wisdom or ethics) *will* ignite the live tinderbox of the violent soul.

An autocrat who befriends fellow autocrats, crushes dissent, and poisons enemies domestically, Mr. Putin is a dark puppeteer also on the international stage. His strongman tactics have made him an “icon” for other strongmen worldwide:

Russia’s military intervention in Georgia in 2008, its annexation of Crimea in 2014, its dispatch of troops to Syria in 2015, its meddling in the US presidential election of 2016. All of these actions burnished Putin’s reputation as a nationalist and a strong leader. They also made him an icon for strongmen throughout the world who rejected western leadership and the “liberal international order.”¹³

For decades, Mr. Putin has used anti-colonial resentment in Europe’s former colonies to gratify his own anti-western sentiments. In 2016, he ordered project Lakhta to intervene in the American election, with the aim of sowing discord in America, and helping Mr. Trump win the 2016 presidential election. In 2015, he intervened militarily in Syria, where he honed his violence. With blood-stained hands, a mind befogged by delusion, and a predilection for violence that increases with age, he has, at age 69, attacked Ukraine – escalating the 2014 Russo-Ukraine war to a revanchist invasion launched on February 24, 2022.

In his *Allegory of the Cave*, Plato’s puppeteers deceive the enchained prisoners into believing that the shadows they see on the underground cave wall constitute full reality.¹⁴ A trace of truth lingers in this deception, for even shadows retain a hint of reality. The laws of physics command shadows to mimic their originals in two instead of three dimensions. The puppeteers, therefore, cannot contort shadows to create pure fiction. The fiction lies not in shadows, but in the delusion of the prisoners, who take shadows to be the fullest reality. Plato’s puppeteers are therefore distinct from Mr. Putin, whose machinations are devoid of even the trace of

10) Reuters, “‘There will be dad and mum.’”

11) Boffey, “Ukrainian children used.”

12) People turn to religion for all kinds of reasons – often seeking relief from hellish states of mind. The practice of religion (not the religious identity) makes us turn inward. When a worldly, vengeful, violent person turns prematurely to religion, he succumbs to an unholy inwardness that makes him mistake his own ego for God. His extreme violence produces in the consummate hypocrite, a Jekyll-Hyde polarity, fragmenting his soul into warring shards that manifest themselves through a cesspool of subjectivity and delusion.

13) Rachman, “Understanding Putin.”

14) Plato, *Republic*, 376–77.

reality and truth intrinsic in shadows. A far more sinister puppeteer, he is using the violence of a hi-tech war to impose on Ukraine a total fiction – his unreal revanchist view of Ukraine and his self-aggrandized sense of historical mission.¹⁵ Plato's puppeteers had greater access to truth, reality, and objectivity than the prisoners they deceived. Unlike the prisoners, they *knew* shadows to be shadows. But Mr. Putin may be too deluded to be capable of even the semblance of objectivity necessary in a puppeteer. Western sources have anointed him with many choice epithets – from “bare-chested kleptocrat on horseback,” and “Botoxed Bond villain,” to “aging autocrat” and “isolated, aging dictator.”¹⁶ Gabuev, a Russian academic, has dubbed him “the tsar.”¹⁷ But no epithet perhaps suits Mr. Putin better, than “dark puppeteer.”

Both a sign and a creator of his times, Mr. Putin proves that individuality matters in the grand sweep of History, wherein free-will is a mere wave – but one that pushes *and* flows. But contemporary analyses of socio-historical phenomena often neglect the individual and his inwardness. Succumbing to the soul-searing cynicism characteristic of the retching soul of modernity, scholars today tend to obliterate inwardness, thus denying free-will. This inordinate self-exteriorization makes them deduce the individual from socio-historical forces – instead of seeing external forces as a result of the actions of individuals – thus prioritizing broad precipitating causes above immediate causes rooted in individual agents and their moral choices. Applied to the tragedy of Ukraine, this means we either blame Mr. Putin without historical context, or blame his historical context, without granting him free-will or agency – thereby deducing him as a result of his context.

Thus in 2014, Mearsheimer points to several precipitating causes of the Ukraine crisis – “When Russian leaders look at Western social engineering in Ukraine, they worry that their country might be next. And such fears are hardly groundless. ... The West's triple package of policies – NATO enlargement, EU expansion, and democracy promotion – added fuel to a fire waiting to ignite.”¹⁸ More recently, Mearsheimer reiterates that Moscow was defensive rather than imperialistic in its invasion of Ukraine – “Contrary to the conventional wisdom in the West, Moscow did not invade Ukraine to conquer it and make it part of a Greater Russia. It was principally concerned with preventing Ukraine from becoming a Western bulwark on the Russian border. Putin and his advisers were especially concerned about Ukraine eventually joining NATO.”¹⁹

Two points are missing in these analyses – the role of the individual and his free-will, and the difference between precipitating causes and immediate causes, of which, the latter should be more culpable morally. To blame NATO's eastward expansion is to miss this higher principle – that regardless of the provocation, nothing justifies the rape of a sovereign nation. Since it is specific individuals who plan and wage war on behalf of the state, the individual remains ultimately culpable in a way the state, which lacks direct free-will, can never be. Moreover, those individuals who trigger war, using and abusing soldiers as cannon-fodder, are more culpable than the people they command. War-mongers garner greater demerit than those who follow their orders. Thus, notwithstanding the broader precipitating context of the history of Russia and Ukraine and many other factors (Europe's need for Russian gas, the economics of it all, the role of Russian oligarchs, and so forth) – the fact remains that it was Mr. Putin who triggered this war – nobody else. As the immediate cause of this collective violence against a sovereign nation – even its innocent unarmed civilians, including children and the elderly – he alone is culpable to a degree nobody else is.

15) Mr. Putin is “imbued with a mythic sense of mission.” See Peters, “Vladimir Putin and the Russian Soul.”

16) For “bare-chested kleptocrat on horseback,” see Moreton, “The U.S. Christians Who Pray for Putin.” For “Botoxed Bond villain,” see Freedland, “Putin's invasion is faltering?” For “aging autocrat” and “isolated, aging dictator,” see Cohen, “The Strategy.”

17) Rachman, “Understanding Putin.”

18) Mearsheimer, “Ukraine Crisis.”

19) Mearsheimer, “Playing with Fire.”

We are each, both couriers and agents of History – tempering our instrumental character as couriers, with the volition inherent in our agency. Our instrumental character allows for unequal roles in the spectacle of History – roles we do not get to choose. Some are more pivotal to the purpose of History than others. Or, as the Stoic philosopher Epictetus says – “Remember that you are an actor in a play, which is as the playwright wants it to be: short if he wants it short, long if he wants it long. ... What is yours is to play the assigned part well. But to choose it belongs to someone else.”²⁰ Applying Epictetus to someone like Mr. Putin, is difficult, because his aggrandized sense of historical agency beclouds his role as a mere courier of History. Although an insidious agent of History – or dark puppeteer *par excellence* – he is also a puppet or courier of History. *Qua* puppet, his instrumental role does not obliterate the moral culpability inherent in his God-given free-will. Having long lost touch with Conscience and free-will, and filled with messianic egotism, he is perhaps too deluded to be aware that by invading Ukraine, he has abused his free-will and historical agency.

That the individual matters is proved also in the extreme polarity between the moral character of the two heads of state in the Russo-Ukraine conflict – with Mr. Putin, Russia’s revanchist autocrat, and Mr. Zelenskyy, Ukraine’s democratically elected president, praised for his “masterclass of leadership” and “depth of character during a time of extreme crisis.”²¹ The polarity between the two is extreme because they come from opposite ends of the moral spectrum. If Mr. Putin exerts power, Mr. Zelenskyy exerts strength. The contrast between their styles of governance, therefore, manifests the stark difference between power and strength. Power, which is born of the vices, characterizes the autocrat, while moral strength, which is born of the virtues, anoints the leader.

The individual matters all the more in a crisis, because, more than anything else, a crisis reveals moral character, which is always individuated. In his metaphoric use of war, the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus says (Fr. 53), “War is father of all, and king of all. He renders some gods, others men; he makes some slaves, others free.”²² Applying his words to Russia’s literal war in Ukraine, we may add that war also makes heroes and leaders out of ordinary people, leaving others the tyrants they always were. Moreover, if we use Heraclitus’ “war” metaphorically, as representing the Hand of History that serves as “father” and “king” of all – we discover an originary-origin that rolls out the dice, making heroes out of ordinary citizens – as it has with Mr. Zelenskyy, who has risen to this extraordinary historical moment with exemplary *élan*.

The art of acting demands of the actor, the creation of a second self – an exterior veil that his inner self uses to sublimate the chasm of alienation that separates the stage from the audience of strangers. Of all actors, the comedian is especially heroic in his ability to make strangers laugh. Equipped with no more than a sense of humor, the comedian uses unselfishness to turn tragedy to comedy. All this applies to Mr. Zelenskyy – a leader thrust upon the world stage by the Pantomime of History – a former comedian who reaches beyond media skills, to use the actor’s veil to retain coherence, courage, artless wisdom, and dignity before his diverse audiences (domestic and international). A product of the two *Zeitgeists* that govern his generation – the combined *ethos* of revolution and technology – Zelenskyy exudes a mix of moral principles and pragmatism – displaying, on the one hand, defiant heroism and disarming affection, and on the other, brilliant strategizing – qualities that characterize his overconfident generation. Where virtues are concerned, Mr. Zelenskyy expresses the lower civic virtues taught by the *ethos* of revolution – especially righteous defiance inspired by a thirst for justice – not the highest virtues we associate with enmity (non-violence, forgiveness, etc.), which, in his situation are infeasible, except inwardly and mentally. Opposing Mr. Zelenskyy and invading his sovereign nation, is Mr. Putin

20) Epictetus, *The Handbook*, 16 (passage 17).

21) Milani and Seijts, “Volodymyr Zelenskyy.”

22) Heraclitus, *Fragments*, 37 (Fragment 53).

– a dour old-world autocrat and former KGB intelligence officer, whose thirst for power and violent proclivities make it hard for him to smile.

The individual and his moral choices therefore maneuver all historical happenings – even as History uses the individual as a pawn. A single individual can, with his moral choices, shake and move the underpinnings of a historical moment.

Putin's Invasion – Three Questions

All wars are cruel. But the hi-tech war of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is historically unique, not only in the malevolence of its technically advanced weapons, but in its *modus operandi* – which can be remote, technocratic, and utilitarian – as if seeking to divest the human hand of culpability for the blood it sheds, as it pulls the trigger to annihilate an unknown, remote enemy. If nuclear weapons are catastrophic, then drone attacks – a result of blind utilitarian reasoning – represent the quintessence of cowardice. Reaching its sadistic peak when waged against a helpless, harmless “enemy,” this cold-blooded malevolence becomes unheroic in the extreme – all the more, when it surrenders human agency to the mechanical “will” of technology – the new god of modernity. Although man is the operator, and the machine his tool, so that man ought to rule the machine, he loses his sense of agency and free-will when he subordinates himself to the machine – by making mechanical and robotic use of technology.

Constituting a final frontier of the scientific spirit, technological thinking is rooted in the lower correspondence notion of truth. Yet, despite this foothold in truth, technology can be used for falsehoods – especially in the hands of a dark puppeteer. When insidious, the culture of technology replaces truthfulness with imagination, mendacity, and fiction – subordinating moral standards below expediency. Concocting “reality” by collating snapshots of empirical reality – or, at best, by using decontextualized images that represent partial truths – technology lends new meaning to the philosophical terms “real” and “unreal.” Unlike Plato, for whom the Good is ultimately real, with the empirical world exhibiting lower degrees of reality – and even shadows on the cave wall, a trace of reality²³ – utilitarian realists, who create, operate, and apply technology, use a mere trace of empirical reality to oppose the “virtual,” which is less empirical – but not unreal. For utilitarian and pecuniary realists, the window to empirical reality is very small – its size commensurate with the passions that drive such realists.

Many human activities can be conducted virtually – but not war, in its entirety. In this highly interconnected twenty-first century world, technology – which, in its amoral utilitarianism, is supremely indifferent to good and evil – has graced both the invader and the invaded in the Russo-Ukraine conflict – even if disproportionately. Thanks to the smart phone and other devices, Mr. Putin's atrocities in Ukraine – unlike the appalling human rights violations by PRC in Tibet – are being documented, not just by journalists, but by ordinary citizens. Based on this evidence, and using the “legal doctrine of command responsibility,” Mr. Putin should face the fullest prosecution for war crimes and atrocities in Ukraine.²⁴

Although not as technocratic or remote as some of America's wars, Mr. Putin's fratricidal invasion counts as among the most unjust and uncivilized of recent wars – with his intention of regime change in Ukraine, a colonial ambition to obliterate the being of this sovereign nation, so as to convert it to an inferior clone of Russia. What makes his invasion all the more hypocritical is Mr. Putin's irrational, revanchist-delusional justification of using violence to purge Ukraine of purported violence. As BBC News reports – “Many of his [President

23) Plato, *Republic*, 376–79.

24) Associated Press in Washington, “Is Vladimir Putin a criminal?”

Putin's] arguments were false or irrational, as he claimed his goal was to protect people subjected to bullying and genocide and aim for the 'demilitarisation and denazification' of Ukraine. There has been no genocide in Ukraine and it is a vibrant democracy led by a president who is Jewish."²⁵

One wonders if Mr. Putin drew inspiration for his hypocritical justification for invasion and regime change in Ukraine from America's multiple instances of regime change in "third world" nations – using the most undemocratic means possible (the hi-tech war) to spread "democracy" and "freedom." Here it helps to invoke Gandhi's basic dictum – that the means used determine the moral worth of the ends sought and reached.²⁶ Applying Gandhi, Mr. Putin's use of violent means to purge an imaginary genocide in Ukraine is the complete converse of a just war, and grotesque in its immorality. Moreover, it is infeasible. For, the relative peace we associate with demilitarization can never come from the barrel of a gun.

Like all bullies, Mr. Putin anticipated little to no resistance in Ukraine. Reminiscent of America's shock and awe subjugation of Iraq, his invasion was expected to be a swift overthrow of Ukraine's democratically elected government, followed by regime change. The courageous resistance of the Ukrainian people has taken Mr. Putin by surprise. Perhaps so have protests from Russian citizens (including some top billionaires). Moreover, the hi-tech war is contingent in a way no other product is. Yes, war too is a product – one that reifies violence. One humdrum aspect of modern technological production is the mechanical certitude of its products, and consequently, the predictable character of their performance. Not so the modern hi-tech war, which draws its contingency, not from mechanical failures, but from unforeseen historical happenings that prove two truisms – that might is not always right, and that in the end, truth always triumphs. According to military experts, Russia's problems arise from its own disorganization, underperformance, and overconfidence.²⁷ To this we may add the drooping morale and mutiny of some Russian soldiers. All this may compel Mr. Putin to curb his violence – on pragmatic (not moral) grounds.

The collective voice of protesting western democracies is something to question as well. Since western sanctions hurt ordinary Russian citizens more than anybody else, they are inherently unjust. More importantly, the west's scorching hypocrisy obliterates its moral authority to rebuke any invader, through sanctions or otherwise. Like PRC, which has long forfeited its moral authority to rebuke any invader, given its invasion of Tibet – the west (especially America) has long forfeited the moral authority to rebuke any invader, given its history of repeated hi-tech neo-colonial violence in "third world" nations.

Yet, despite these shortcomings, the voice and leadership of the west matter in this twenty-first century invasion. Every civilization comes with its essential teleological virtue. That of western civilization is justice – despite stunning travesties of justice in its long history. Thus, notwithstanding its lack of adequate moral authority, the voice and leadership of the west matters in this crisis, because the west continues to be a guardian of justice.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine raises at least three questions. First, while it is wonderful that many nations did chorus against Mr. Putin, why is the world still so lacking in cosmopolitanism, empathy, and true brotherhood? Why did the west not protest other invasions, atrocities, genocides, and tragedies from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries – like the bombing of Yemen by US-backed Saudi forces, America's hi-tech wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, PRC's invasion of Tibet, the ongoing conflict in Ethiopia, and so forth? Why did racism raise its ugly head even in the refugee situation in Ukraine – despite the fact that Ukraine's multi-ethnic citizens include Afro-Ukrainians?

25) Kirby, "Why is Russia invading?"

26) Gandhi, *All Men Are Brothers*, 74, 76.

27) Visual Storytelling Team, "Resistance altered Putin's war."

There are perhaps four aspects to this schism between the west and non-west – preferential treatment for white Ukrainian refugees, prejudice against people of color fleeing Ukraine, prejudice against refugees fleeing non-western nations to the west, and the nonchalance of some Asian and African nations (former European colonies), with respect to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Regarding the second, Polish nationalists have attacked people of African, South Asian, and Middle Eastern origin fleeing Ukraine.²⁸ Moreover, the Nigerian government has condemned discrimination against thousands of its citizens at the Ukraine-Poland border.²⁹ All this proves how far the west continues to fall short of the universal ideal of genuine cosmopolitanism – despite our historically unprecedented global interconnectedness:

CBS News senior foreign correspondent Charlie D’Agata stated last week that Ukraine “isn’t a place, with all due respect, like Iraq or Afghanistan, that has seen conflict raging for decades. This is a relatively civilized, relatively European – I have to choose those words carefully, too – city, one where you wouldn’t expect that, or hope that it’s going to happen”. ... The BBC interviewed a former deputy prosecutor general of Ukraine, who told the network: “It’s very emotional for me because I see European people with blue eyes and blond hair ... being killed every day.” Rather than question or challenge the comment, the BBC host flatly replied, “I understand and respect the emotion.” On France’s BFM TV, journalist Phillipe Corbé stated this about Ukraine: “We’re not talking here about Syrians fleeing the bombing of the Syrian regime backed by Putin. We’re talking about Europeans leaving in cars that look like ours to save their lives.” ... An ITV journalist reporting from Poland said: “Now the unthinkable has happened to them. And this is not a developing, third world nation. This is Europe!”³⁰

The contrast between the west’s exemplary welcome of white Ukrainian refugees – and its racist treatment of refugees of color in Calais, or the treatment by Polish authorities of nearly two thousand asylum-seekers who crossed in from Belarus in 2021 – detaining them arbitrarily, and subjecting many to abuse (including “strip searches” and in some cases, to “forcible sedation and tasing”) – could not be more stark or tragic.³¹

It is equally sad to see some of Europe’s former colonies in Asia and Africa bear colonial grudges enough, to have refrained from condemning Mr. Putin and his armed forces, without distinguishing between those European countries that engaged in colonialism and those that did not. Moreover, from a human rights standpoint, these former colonies should have protested, even if Mr. Putin had invaded a former European colonizer instead of Ukraine. This proves that anti-colonialism, unless rooted in human rights, becomes unjust – even reverse-racist. These examples also prove how far the world, as a whole, still falls short of the ideal of true cosmopolitanism, which shines forth when the universal illumines the particular by striking roots in it.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine raises a second question. Why do armed forces obey the whims of an autocrat? Their need for discipline is understandable. So is the need to subordinate them below a head of state (to prevent military coups and takeovers). But when does the relationship of the armed forces with their commander-in-chief become so cultish that they obey blindly the insane orders of an “aging autocrat”?

Third, how do we prevent a revanchist, delusional, megalomaniacal sadist like Mr. Putin – to whom, Ukraine is not even a nation – from occupying positions of power? How do we sublimate the dictator’s thirst

28) Tondo and Akinwotu, “People of colour attacked by Polish.”

29) Akinwotu and Strzyżyńska, “Nigeria condemns.”

30) Bayoumi, “The racist coverage of Ukraine.”

31) Amnesty International, “Poland/Belarus: Evidence of abuses.”

for power, to a spirit of service? Mr. Putin's barbaric invasion proves that the temptation of power continues to haunt politics, in both its basic genres (statecraft and protest-politics), as it has since time immemorial. For all our technological advancements and the *hubris* of the twenty-first century, we continue to be susceptible to this primitive temptation – because the thirst to rule is inherent in both genres of politics. If free-will comes with the risk of evil, then politics comes with that of power. Unlike good forms of power, which come with legitimate authority because they are vested with responsibility, the raw desire to rule is an evil form of power that comes with *illegitimate* authority. Always violent, bad power reaches its zenith when sadistic – as in torture and unjust wars.

For Plato, the solution lay in cultivating the ideal leader, who, having glimpsed the numinous glory of the Idea of Good, would be fit to act with wisdom in statecraft.³² By implication, he would no longer be interested in political power. This, perhaps, is the highest solution to the problem of power in politics. But only a rare few reach this consummate ideal. What the rest of us need is not merely the structured democracy, which, in its western forms, has been no less war-prone – but a *moral* democracy – with checks and balances, strict term limits for heads of state, plus mature disciplined citizens who are capable of following democratically-created, morally sound rules.

Not all moral attributes are absolute – meaning, they do not apply the same way, across space and time. Depending on their empirical contexts, they can be virtues, vices, or forms of necessary evil. In some contexts they are virtuous, while in others, they are vices. Ukraine proves that for at least two reasons, non-violence, although the highest ideal, is not an absolute virtue – meaning, it does not apply everywhere, always. First, not everyone is morally capable of facing violence with non-violence. To force a person to do so would be violent. Second, non-violence is not feasible in all empirical situations. Ukraine could not afford non-violence before Russian armed forces (one of the largest in the world), for the first phases of this war. Like the Tibetans (towards PRC's invading soldiers), the Ukrainians have been brave, cheeky, and resilient (towards Russia's invading soldiers). While this is praiseworthy, they have also needed weapons, which, for them, have been as essential to life as food and water! Moreover, Ukraine proves that like non-violence – patriotism, defiance, and even war itself – are not absolute in their moral character, or lack thereof. In some contexts, they are virtuous, while in others, they are vices. Thus the same attribute of patriotism, which, in Ukraine is a virtue, becomes a vice in the blind nationalism of Mr. Putin and his followers in Russia. Moreover, the attribute of defiance, which is a virtue in the indomitable spirit of the Ukrainians, becomes a vice in Mr. Putin's defiance of the west. In the invader, war is sadistic, unjust, and morally wrong. But in the nation attacked, a war of defense, while still violent, can be a just war – or a necessary evil. Finally, the ability to ignore criticism is not an absolute virtue. While a virtue in a leader, it becomes a vice in an autocrat, who ignores global disapproval. Mr. Putin's autocratic sneer at global opprobrium is a sign that he has crossed the threshold of shame that separates those who are still capable of shame, and hence, worthy of restorative justice – from those who are shameless, and therefore merit retributive justice. Blind-sighted by egotism, Mr. Putin appears undeterred by the world voices raised against him, whether through UN resolutions or street protests. The fact that a majority of nations voted for the UN General Assembly resolution “demanding that Russia immediately end its military operations in Ukraine” – has left Mr. Putin undeterred, thus proving, that like all autocrats, he is contemptuous of world opinion.³³

32) Plato, *Republic*, 379.

33) 141 out of 193 UN member states voted in favor of the United Nations General Assembly resolution, demanding that Russia “immediately, completely and unconditionally withdraw all of its military forces from the territory of Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders.” UN News, “General Assembly Resolution.”

Conclusion

Of all current crises afflicting the world today – from the pandemic to climate change – the Russo-Ukraine war is uniquely significant, for at least two reasons – because it reveals how important the individual (Mr. Putin) can be in the machinations of History, and because it threatens a nuclear catastrophe that can alter the course of world history forever. Moreover, the second highlights the first. For, this war proves that a single individual's abuse of his free-will can lead to the greatest apocalypse the world has ever seen. It proves, as well, that violence is sometimes a necessary evil, in order to thwart greater violence. Finally, it proves how far the world still falls short of the numinous ideal of true cosmopolitanism, without which, war remains endemic to human nature.

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