

## **Atrocities, War, and Democracy**



**ATROCITIES AND WAR** are inseparable. Rape, torture, random killings, murder, are the stuff of war. Human beings are reduced to detritus scattered amongst the mangled cars, trucks, tanks and assorted ironmongery. Terror and hatred combined together in a witches' cauldron of despair. The perpetrators and their victims locked together in a fruitless struggle for survival. There is nothing untoward about the slaughter in Bucha, nothing unusual about the carnage in Ukraine.

Conquering armies are truly terrible, defeated ones are even worse. As the Third Reich went down in flames in the Spring of 1945 SS squads roamed the streets and countryside murdering anybody suspected of surrender or retreat, while the Red Army raped its way into Germany, losing

ten thousand boy soldiers every day, killed and wounded; Stalin's profligacy in spending soldiers' lives in the race to the Reichstag is well documented. The Holodomor, Vinnytsia, Katyn: the lists of Soviet state-induced famines, and massacres, are more or less endless. Despite the invincible confidence of the current members of the Duma, in the stories told by Vladimir Putin, and the Russian Television and Radio Broadcasting Network, the world knows of the extensive bombardment of entire neighbourhoods of flats and houses in Ukraine. We know that when the atrocities are verified and catalogued, we will not be amazed.

So, enough of the surprised indignation!

This war in Ukraine is about democracy. It is the result of a long chain of events. When the leaders of Belorussia, Ukraine, and Russia, Stanislav Shushkevich, Leonid Kravchuk, and Boris Yeltsin, decided on December 8<sup>th</sup> 1991 to dissolve the Soviet Union. The three leaders were responding to the rapid disintegration of the USSR, and they set in train a series of catastrophic events that left Russia without an empire and an economy in ruins.

The West did not help, apart from promising not to expand NATO east of Germany. Little concrete help was forthcoming from the United States. Dazzled by the success of their victory over the Soviets, the USA's ruling elite was upbeat, dominant and domineering. So, Russia's leaders were left to wallow in dismay, wondering what to do about radical economic dislocation, and how to construct a state capable of effective administration. Unsurprisingly these Soviet-era chaps – they were almost entirely policemen and male bureaucrats – did not make a very good fist of it. They resorted to type, solving problems by fiat, arbitrary decisions from those on high, without the restraint of law, the oversight of a free media, or the active participation of the wider

population. It is true that the orthodox church rapidly revived, but this deeply reactionary hierarchical institution, autonomous of the state, had to stand alone for civil society throughout Russia.

Evidently, the country could not, in these conditions, become a democracy in any meaningful sense. Without the rule of law, without the lively growth of free trade unions, charities, free speech and media outlets, lobbies, independent political parties, and a variety of campaigning organisations, the slide towards autocracy became all but inevitable. The Americans ignored this reality as they did in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and a host of other places. For the Whitehouse and the Pentagon democracy in foreign parts remained a series of abstractions that never flowered into a culture of consent and participation. As long as there were elections, a parliament, and a line-up of plausible-looking chaps in charge, the substance of democracy and state building was left look after itself.

Russia was as much a victim of the triumphalism and disregard, characteristic of the West, as anywhere else. As the ingrained tradition of arbitrary rule, of the Romanovs, of the Bolsheviks, of Comrade Stalin, and Leonid Brezhnev, gradually began to reassert itself, Russia's newly freed neighbours, fearing for their safety and independence, flocked towards NATO and the guarantees on offer. The West's earlier promise to Moscow, not to expand eastwards, was quietly forgotten, paving the way for paranoia in the Caucasus, mass slaughter in Grozny, alliance with Bashar al-Assad's Syria, and Moscow's annexations and wars in Georgia, Crimea, and Donbas, resulting in the on-going attempt to utterly destroy the Ukrainian state.

This is compounded by the crisis of democracy in the West. Our television stations and mass circulation newspapers and websites

are largely owned by billion-dollar corporations and companies. Our trade unions are bureaucratic and moribund, our charities have been subsumed by the state, often simply plugging the gaps in public provision. Free speech is assaulted on all sides by people wanting to banish hate – censoring a better world into existence – dreaming up new laws and regulations. Meanwhile our political parties and our politicians appear unable to lead, as they dumbly follow opinion polls and popular trends, incapable of withstanding disapproval or facing down malign and ignorant prejudices.

I remember some forty years ago sitting in a tenants' meeting on a council estate in South London suddenly realising that the tenants' association, was being run by the landlord. The landlord in this case was represented by the ward councillors of the Labour council, which owned and ran the housing estate. It struck me then as bizarre, and ever since I have noted the gradual hollowing out of civil society organisations and institutions by the desire of those in authority to take control of the agenda and of the day-to-day functioning of campaigns, and the voluntary sector, by the manipulation of grants and other resources.

This has, no doubt, been a spontaneous and unplanned development as the mass of ordinary citizens have gradually withdrawn from active participation, except as contributors, volunteers, and helpers, rather than people seeking to shape organisations or determine the policy of their associations and unions. These trends have multiple causes as our society has been radically transformed by globalisation, technological innovation, and changes in how most people live and work. So, the hollowing out of our democracy has been a gradual and complex process and no doubt will require complex solutions. However, there can be little doubt that democracy is worth

defending even in the woebegone and dilapidated state into which it has fallen.

This is among the issues which loom large in the Russo-Ukrainian War. The scepticism regarding our Western democracy throughout much of the left has resulted in a preparedness to give Vladimir Putin some room for manoeuvre. There is much focus on the broken promises and misbehaviour of the West, and much cynicism regarding 'our' democratic values. It is truly disastrous, because there is now, *whether we like it or not*, a standoff between bourgeois democracy and various forms of authoritarian rule across the world. This is the content and nature of the new 'Cold War'. From Venezuela to India, from China to Turkey, from Tehran to Budapest, from Damascus to Moscow, there is a growing trend of strong men being appointed to rule, more or less for life, unconstrained by constitutions or the courts. What they say and what they believe is sacrosanct – it is the indisputable 'truth' which cannot be gainsaid.

The despots, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, are at the extreme of these developments, but they are, without doubt, leaders of the pack. Consequently, in the ideological struggle for democracy, it is imperative that Putin, *autocrat of all the Russias*, is defeated and diminished. This is what the war in Ukraine is all about. If the tyrant is allowed to prevail then there can be little doubt that reactionary elements in Poland, Hungary, and Ukraine, will prosper as authoritarian rule becomes entrenched. Authoritarians everywhere will take heart and the suppression of freedom of expression, the narrowing of the rights of women, and of the liberty of homosexuals, will become general throughout the world. Government by consent and the rule of law will be radically undermined in one country after another.

This is why attempts by some people on the left who wish to focus on the lies and deficiencies

of the West's leaders and elites are making a serious error. The defence of bourgeois democracy cannot be shied away from because without it the militant democracy of socialism will become inconceivable. Militant democracy in which the mass of the people might seek to run the economy, directing investment towards social purposes, rather than the dividends of the capitalist class must be our overriding objective. However, the rights and freedoms we now enjoy in the commercial society of the West are essential if we are to promote the growth of socialist or militant democracy, in the culture and practice of our people.

It is for these reasons that we must campaign for NATO to redouble its efforts in the defence of Ukraine, and in assisting the final victory of her state and its people.