

Watching the War



I HAVE NEVER EXPERIENCED WAR. I have been close to it in Israel, Palestine, and the North of Ireland, but have never felt the impact of explosions nor seen the dead littering the ground. Historically, this is remarkably good luck for a man of my age – to have lived into my late seventies without experiencing wholesale ruin and killings by the bushel. Of course, I grew up playing in bomb sites in the ‘Post War’ gloom, amidst the taut emotional embrace of those damaged beyond repair by fear, and the determination, demanded of them; trivialised today by the repetition of the injunction, “Keep Calm, and Carry On”.

So, although my childhood and teenage years was dominated by the aftermath of war, and the onset of new carnage, in Korea, in Cyprus, in Egypt, in ‘our’ colonies, and in Vietnam, I’ve had no direct experience of it. Yet in recent months I have sat in an

armchair, day after day, watching the progress of the war in Ukraine as tens of thousands die in squalid misery. Human beings reduced to detritus amidst the rubble.

With forensic attention I attempt to assess the YouTube videos. I notice that a bridge has been demolished without leaving any debris below it, or a fire on the side of an armoured vehicle, appearing as a perfectly regular square of flames. Frauds permitted with the best of intentions, but frauds nonetheless. Then there are those put out by the Sun newspaper, which has a penchant for great bursts of fire with vast clouds of smoke rising above the battle below. Interviews with Russian prisoners of war, well fed and well treated, helpfully coached by friendly Ukrainian interrogators. I note my tendency to avoid videos which side with the enemy, discounting as propaganda anything they have to say about Russia's conduct of Putin's War.

On the other hand, there are remarkable scenes of fighting, of drone strikes, of grenades tossed into bunkers, and heroic charges on trench lines across fields pock-marked by shell holes and burning vehicles. Occasionally, one glimpses a running man stumble and fall, a body sprawled across a ditch, a tank on fire.

This is not a movie nor a video game – there are bewildered Russian youngsters burning to death, in agony, and terror, as I sit watching in a confusion of elation and grief. Ukrainian firefighters stumbling through the rubble, looking for bodies of dead children. And so, it goes on, occasionally weeping, occasionally cheering, but reminded all the time, this is not a movie, it really is happening, yet again, in what Timothy Snyder has called the *Bloodlands*. Old tragedies, revealed as the waters from the collapse of the Kakhovka Dam wash up skeletons of German soldiers killed eighty-odd years ago – one with a Wehrmacht helmet firmly jammed onto its skull – another job for the German war graves commission.

Time worn euphemisms are in play, as Ukrainian troops “clear” trenches, clean villages, and the enemy is “eliminated” or “swept aside”. *Glory to Ukraine!* While President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, embattled in t-shirt and khaki trousers, hands out medals, Ukrainian soldiers are struggling to kill as many Russians as they can – they are inevitably being brutalised by the necessity of killing and maiming the young men in front of them. How else could it be? One is forced to ponder the psychological damage, the broken lives, of people and families, as wrecked as the buildings, fields, and woods, that the soldiers stumble through.

Yet there is necessity here. The war is necessary, the Ukrainians with their dodgy nationalists; their “filtration” of civilians who survive Russian occupation, their security police relentlessly hunting for those in their midst who side with the enemy, with oligarchs (who, for the time-being on the back foot), with all that’s wrong with Kyiv, they are in the right. Putin’s invasions and annexations since 2014 must be fought, there can be no surrender. Even if the Ukrainian state collapsed an insurgency would ensue in which the most backward and irredentist sentiments would prevail. Consequently, the war to preserve the coherence and integrity of the Ukrainian state is as progressive as it is inescapable.

Kyiv’s allies, the ‘civilised’ world, known widely as ‘the democracies’, gathered in and around NATO, who’s virtues are patchy to say the least. Quite apart from Viktor Orbán, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, both elected tyrants, there is NATO’s history of dubious adventures and failed regime changes, which do not bode well for any future. And yet . . . and yet . . . when it comes to the battle between Vladimir Putin’s ambitions measured against those of the European Union, and the West in general, there can be no comparison. By and large the Western democracies, including Japan, Australia, South Korea, and Taiwan, represent our best hope against the autocracies in

Beijing, Moscow, and Tehran – an “axis of evil” if ever there was one.

This is not the first time that political failure has delivered our populations bound hand and foot to the great powers. In the 1930s the victory of fascism in Europe forced us back into the arms of Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin. Today, there is a choice, either the Western powers back Ukraine’s struggle for survival, or Russia’s takes back “Kiev”, plans Moscow’s future expansions, and the new annexations that appeasement will make possible, starting perhaps with Belarus and Moldova, ending God knows where.

It could have been different. If NATO and the Western powers had massively aided Moscow in the years 1991 to 1999, with resources sufficient to enable Russia’s transition to democracy, things could have been very different. If the billions of dollars now being spent on Ukraine’s defence had been spent on extirpating Russia from the collapse of her society and economy in the nineties, if the West had helped rescue her from the grip of oligarchs and corruption, a political class and a democratic public might have come into being. Now, we’ll never know.

The second crime committed by NATO in the region was failing to respond to the annexation of Crimea and the establishment of pro-Moscow insurgencies in Eastern Ukraine. The failure to act against the Kremlin’s brazen violations of Ukraine’s sovereignty in 2014 was taken as appeasement by Vladimir Putin, and led ineluctably to his full-scale invasion in February 2022 widely advertised as the “Special Military Operation”.

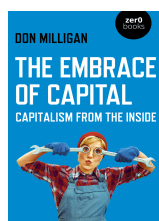
Of course, it was true that the NATO powers were involved up to their armpits in the Maidan Revolt which paralysed Kyiv for months in the winter of 2013 into 2014. They funded the opposition, promoted charities and pro-Western civil society organisations. Advisers from the US Embassy were always on hand. The West was well behind the scenes, which led to the ousting of Moscow’s man, President Viktor

Yanukovich. He was forced to flee the capital after he reneged on his pledge to sign a deal with the European Union, and his police killed 108 unarmed demonstrators. His authority completely collapsed – the great majority of Ukraine’s citizens supported the changes sought by the West, and were pleased to see the back of Putin’s man. This, of course, led directly to the Russian annexation of Crimea, and Moscow’s support for the armed uprising of pro-Russian elements opposed to the independence of the Ukrainian state. In 2014 Moscow essentially repeated in the Donbas, the aggressions it had perpetrated in Georgia in 2008, and NATO, once again, stood idly by.

So, yes, NATO simply watched while Russia sank under the weight of the failure of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, and contributed in a number of complicated ways to both, the rise of Putin’s autocracy, and the peril that now threatens Ukraine’s survival. But NATO is (and it is only NATO), that now has the wherewithal to assist the settlement of the Russo-Ukrainian War on Kyiv’s terms.

This is why support for NATO’s efforts is vital in the struggle to achieve a negotiated settlement of the war.

But, before negotiations can begin, Ukraine must have rendered Russia’s position on the battlefield more or less hopeless. Crimea, at the very least, must be back in Kyiv’s hands, before any useful talks can begin. This might result in the collapse of Putin’s presidency – it might even result in the collapse of the entire regime in Moscow, but let’s hope that Russia is not once again overwhelmed by disorder and chaos, because if it is, war within the Russian Federation could presage new threats, and new instabilities in Central and Eastern Europe.



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