

Easter and Kalashnikov

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Some personal reflections from Ukrainian spring 2022

It's Easter in Ukraine today, as I'm starting this text. At least Ukrainian Orthodox Christians (no matter if they belong to the church recognized by Constantinople Patriarchy, or to the one subordinated to the war-mongering Moscow Patriarch) celebrate it on 24 April this year, as well as Ukrainian Greek-Catholics.

And it's also two months since Russia's full-scale invasion into Ukraine, which started on 24 February 2022. As one war criminal, a star of Russian TV propaganda would put it: "Coincidence? I don't think so!" Of course it is a coincidence – but also a pretext for me to reflect upon these two months in a very personal context I don't usually go public about: my faith and war. Needless to say that these reflections are very subjective, but I hope they tell at least something important about my Ukraine at war to those interested enough to listen.

My Easter, my unit

I have attended Easter night church service in previous years – or at least joined it online during the pandemic. This year I've missed it. My guard shift started at 5AM, so I needed to get a few hours of sleep before it.

My sleeping bag takes a very high place among friends I've made in the last two months, together with my Kalashnikov assault rifle which I must carry on a shift. And yes, the tablet I'm using to write this text is treasured as well.

It was presented to me by colleagues and friends from an independent broadcasting company "Hromadske Radio" for moments like this one, and then volunteers Sasha and Yulia provided me with a little keyboard – so it's not only a tool, but a tangible expression of solidarity to me.

These three items – sleeping bag, Kalashnikov rifle and a tablet – go right next after humans (my brothers in arms) on the list of new friends I've made since the beginning of the current Russian invasion.

(Oh, I probably need to clarify: two months ago I went voluntarily to the military registration office. Within a week filled with humanitarian efforts and uncertainty, I received a long-awaited phone call, put my human rights activities on hold, and joined the army. So, I am with the UAF – Ukrainian Armed Forces – now.)

So, on my brothers in arms. They are very different: young and older, from the urban environment and from the countryside, experienced in battles and with no previous military history, workers, peasants, drivers, technicians, managers, self-employed; speaking Ukrainian, Russian, or semi-dialect «surzhyk» (mixture of both). Almost all social classes and walks of life can be encountered here (right, so far I haven't met anyone from the richest top of the country's class structure – but that was expected, and statistically that would be difficult anyway). Some got academic degrees, and some never even thought of continuing their education after school. They also differ in their views on religion. The majority upholds at least some traditional Orthodox Christian celebrations and customs, very often combined with ignorance about their meaning or cynicism about the church institutions. Although I have met Muslims, Jews, agnostics and atheists in the ranks, who do not feel out of place here.

And all this incredible diversity, as rich and colorful as Ukrainian society itself, is not divided by inner differences here. There are disagreements on matters of taste or hobbies, goals in private life and visions of the world, but they are no conflict lines (Ukrainian party politics is the subject rather avoided). This whole collective is united by treasuring what Ukraine is to them, feeling of belonging, and self-identification as free people who make their choices in their free country. This is pretty common and obvious even if people in the army don't talk much about it. What they talk about though, apart from jokes and life stories, armaments and protection gear, is anger and the will to fight the invaders. This anger turns into open hatred with every next report about Russian troops shelling Ukrainian cities, mass graves discovered in formerly occupied areas, about raped, maimed and executed civilians, hostages taken and widespread looting committed by Russian soldiers. And there is too much evidence, too many witnesses and victims to even think of these reports as propaganda exercises.

Dehumanization is an unavoidable, and faithful, companion to every war; but sometimes it feels like occupiers do what they can so that Ukrainians could properly hate them.

No matter if it was their intention or not – they have succeeded: the mildest words Ukrainian public most often uses to name Russian invaders are “orcs” and “ruscists” (in Ukrainian and Russian the latter sounds /rʌʃists/, similar to “Russian” and “fascists”), if to mention only those which can be pronounced on air.

Distorted reality and reign of Death

As Easter approached, I could not help myself but to acknowledge the inner tension mounting between the meaning of this day, which is of utmost importance to me, and the context of its celebration this year. Those observing Easter celebrate victory of Life over Death – and this year I celebrate it while being part, on my own will, of the very organization humans created to kill and be killed. On my night guard shift I pronounce the Easter prayers about defeat of Death while keeping the machine, specifically designed to inflict death or injuries, right next to me. And you know what? While acknowledging a tension this situation carries implicitly, I feel no real discomfort about it.

It might seem contradictory and even self-delusional or hypocritical, so this feeling is something I am trying to clarify and reflect upon. It emerged from dealing with tangible phenomena, things on the ground – not from some speculative concepts. All things speculative evaporated with the beginning of the very nightmarish reality people in Ukraine found themselves in two months ago. This reality was set up by war criminals with totalitarian and xenophobic worldview calling themselves ‘antifascists’, labeling their opponents (those who stand for human rights and civil liberties in the first place) ‘Nazis’. In this reality Russian propaganda calls itself ‘critical thinking’ while Russian state criminalizes the use of the word ‘war’; Russian Christian church leader speaks out in a fashion indistinguishable from Antichrist speechwriter; and Russian troops murdering, maiming and disappearing civilians are called their victims’ ‘liberators’.

Some Western intellectuals and public figures suggest that Ukraine should “find a compromise” with Russia’s demands, whatever they are (what are they by the way?), or should be forced

to do so by the Big Powers, based on ‘geo-political realism’ concepts. Some others in the meantime demand that weapons should not be supplied by their states to Ukraine because this would “prolong this nasty war”, based on concepts of ‘anti-militarism’, ‘neutrality’ or ‘non-violence’. These suggestions and demands fall within this down-the-rabbit-hole ‘reality’ very naturally, saying more about what exist inside the proponents’ minds than about anything else. No surprise many Ukrainians respond to these by inviting ‘good-willing’ outsiders to the liberated areas and battle zones of Ukraine: these responses are not insults, but invitations to conduct a reality check by dealing with it on the ground rather than trying to fit it into Procrustean bed of speculative concepts.

Those who had doubts, internationally, about the ideological substance of “russkij mir” (“Russian world”), hopefully left them behind after what the world witnessed in Ukrainian areas occupied or besieged by Russian ‘liberators’. Horrors of Bucha, Irpin, Hostomel, Mariupol, Kharkiv, Chernihiv and many other cities and towns made clear a very simple equation: “russkij mir” = “death, suffering, humiliation and destruction”. It’s not only about the numbers of people killed, injured and displaced. It’s not only about survivors’ personal stories all merging into the ocean of pain ruscists dug with their actions. It’s about the reality where map of Ukrainian territories occupied by Russian troops has clearly shown where, very physically, death reigned supreme; where life was just an obviously fragile phenomena, almost an accidental aberration, at best replaced by biological survival – and ‘safety’ was as a non-existent concept as ‘dignity’.

That very dignity which has powerful meaning for both secular and religious people; that very dignity which is the foundation to the very human rights concept; which was the moving force for many participants of 2013–14 Maidan uprising in Ukraine, and which takes an important place in contemporary Ukrainian conceptual vocabulary, was among the first things eliminated by occupiers’ terror.

Dignity embodies some of the most important opposites to the dominant Russian ideology and state practices, so it is crushed ruthlessly in current repressions both inside Russia and wherever the Kremlin can reach. Unfortunately, in occupied Ukrainian areas this is still the case. How far would the Kremlin like to stretch these occupied areas? Putin’s saying that “Russia’s border doesn’t end anywhere” offers a partial response to this question.

A genocide by any other name

The only practical goal of this “special operation on Ukraine”, as Russian rulers call it, is very visible now: to wipe out of existence everything related to the community of Ukrainians, like language, identity, values, – and, on a larger scale, everything existing on these lands different from the uniformed vision of the world which is approved by the war criminals in Kremlin.

It’s not even that people in Ukraine should love Putin or follow his orders – they should be disappeared as Ukrainians, as people holding such an identity, as those who treasure freedoms and choices, as the undesirable and dangerous Other. They should be disappeared collectively as a community becoming the thing of the past, dead and forgotten. But this can’t be done otherwise but physically removing individuals belonging to this community, embodying its identity, its institutions and values. That means they should be killed, kidnapped, broken or evicted – and this is what is happening in the Russian-controlled territories of Ukraine now. On a smaller scale

attacks against individuals motivated by their affiliation to a certain community are called 'hate crimes'. On a large scale they are called 'genocide'. But beyond dictionaries this is the same thing, just taking place on a different scale. Death-spreading which targets communities and individuals is Russian modus operandi in Ukraine these days, being the only strategy fit for the set goals.

Under no circumstances this march of death should be victorious. It just should not be allowed to take place – instead, we should stop it at the farthest possible outpost. And the only tool we've got at our disposal to do that, in a situation we find ourselves in, is to take up arms. Ruscists left us no time to consider other options, even if there were any (and it doesn't seem to be the case: they have shown many times that any suggestion of 'talks' and 'discussion' is taken as a sign of weakness and an invitation to wreak more havoc). The appeals to common values and rational concepts obviously fall into deaf ears – signalling that there are probably no such values and concepts left.

Life is back and kicking

In recent weeks I have witnessed life coming back to the streets of liberated villages and towns of Ukraine, after Russian troops were kicked out of them. Locals started to go out of their houses and basements, some of them hungry and all of them scared, crying and hugging Ukrainian soldiers, offering them scarce food and flowers, clearing rubbles, preparing to bury their dead. These were very material expressions of liberation in almost biblical terms: liberation from foreign domination and repression, from tyranny, from fear and death, even if pain and despair were still in the air. I don't think I will ever forget it: watching life prevailing over death after liberation, in a very Easter-like manner – not 'conceptually', but very tangibly and visibly. It was like I was watching local Easter on earth in the making, being part of it myself, with my Kalashnikov rifle. And no, it did not feel uncomfortable.

I am not trying to pretend that everything is totally fine with this picture. There is something very wrong, as deeply broken as the world itself, with the need to use killing machines in order to ensure victory of life, even in 2022. This is probably another important point in the long list of accusations against Putin and his fellow genocidal war criminals, even if this one won't make it to the earthly International Tribunal: invaders made even those Ukrainians who were peaceful and non-violent, hate and willing to kill them. First in 2014, and (as if that wasn't enough) then in 2022 Ukrainians en masse go into displacement, switch to military slang, purchase all the military-related gear in the wider region, subordinate all their wishes and priorities to the military needs, while losing their compatriots and loved ones at the frontlines, in bombed cities and occupied areas. This all happened not by choice, but was forced upon this nation by the Russian rulers with predominant consent and support of the Russian Federation population. As a result, millions (no exaggeration) of Ukrainians, political opinions and regional background disregarding, now feel and express negation amounting to pure and flaming hatred towards everything related to Russia not only as a regime, a state – but as a country and a self-proclaimed mindset which shaped and implemented the current nightmare. And looking from Ukraine, it's difficult not to see their point.

12 days later

I am completing this text almost two weeks after starting it, adding and changing it in the meantime bit by bit – the armed forces are not the most inspiring and comfortable environment for writing anything, at least not for me. Today those Ukrainian Christians who still use the Julian calendar, celebrate Saint George Day, while for Ukrainian military and their friends – meaning most of the country – it's the secular Infantry Day. Moscow has picked Saint George defeating the dragon as its symbol a long time ago – but for Ukraine he is a patron saint of Ukrainian soldiers in the current war, while Moscow is the dragon to be defeated. This dragon is still at large: since Easter more Ukrainian cities and areas were bombed and shelled by Russian troops, more military and civilians died at the frontline and deep inside the 'safer regions' of Ukraine, more inhabitants of the occupied areas were kidnapped or forcibly sent to Russia (as Mariupol and Kherson are overshadowed now by even darker tragedies than before).

A week ago a former colleague of mine, a civilian, very professional media producer and a very intelligent and beautiful person Vira Hyrych was killed by a Russian missile which targeted her recently-bought apartment in the centre of Kyiv. Russian media largely remained silent about her, at best reporting a fact in a two-liner – but mentioning of course that Vira worked for the media designated by Moscow a 'foreign agent'. Few days ago a former Luhansk journalist who left for Kyiv after Russia took his home city from him in 2014, a war correspondent in previous years and a military volunteer at the current stage of the war, Olexandr Makhov, was killed by invaders at the frontline in Kharkiv region. Russian "antifascist" propaganda entry on social media specifically mentioned that "he had Russian last name" but fought on "bandera" ('Ukrainian nationalists' – here it means all Ukrainians who do not support Russia) side. Russian 'antifascists', sorting people by the supposed ethnicity of their last names (something unheard of among 'Ukrainian nationalists'), in their text wished him to be buried in a glass wool. These are just two out of many victims of Russian aggression who were killed while this text was in progress: Facebook feed brings more faces or names of those departed all too often. At the same time Russian media propagandists discuss the possibility of a nuclear war on TV in rather positive terms. After reading recent news from the frontline, and while listening to the sirens of the air raid alert, I am going to fold my 'solidarity tablet' and meet my sleeping bag: my night guard shift starts in few hours, and I need to get at least some sleep before picking up my Kalashnikov rifle again. And this is what I am thinking of before falling asleep:

As war destroys lives and livelihoods – its siamese twins, dehumanization and hatred, corrupt souls and make hearts numb. Our souls and our hearts. After we defeat the invaders (and there is no doubt about it – it's not a matter of "if", but of "when" and "at what cost") – the battle for our souls, minds and hearts, will go on for quite some time.

We should not allow hatred and pain to blind us, to make us surrender our openness and diversity, our empathy and freedoms. Neither should we allow them to infect us with the spirit of creeping death by denying other human beings dignity we treasure so much, by normalizing hatred propaganda and preserving dehumanization attitudes beyond the battlefield. This battle will be tough and long as well – but it will be worth it. And I am sure we will be able to win this one as well. Defending our Easter, letting Easter protect us.

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