FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Ukraine Holds the Future

The War Between Democracy and Nihilism

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Russia, an aging tyranny, seeks to destroy Ukraine, a defiant democracy. A Ukrainian victory would confirm the principle of self-rule, allow the integration of Europe to proceed, and empower people of goodwill to return reinvigorated to other global challenges. A Russian victory, by contrast, would extend genocidal policies in Ukraine, subordinate Europeans, and render any vision of a geopolitical European Union obsolete. Should Russia continue its illegal blockade of the Black Sea, it could starve Africans and Asians, who depend on Ukrainian grain, precipitating a durable international crisis that will make it all but impossible to deal with common threats such as climate change. A Russian victory would strengthen fascists and other tyrants, as well as nihilists who see politics as nothing more than a spectacle designed by oligarchs to distract ordinary citizens from the destruction of the world. This war, in other words, is about establishing principles for the twenty-first century. It is about policies of mass death and about the meaning of life in politics. It is about the possibility of a democratic future.

Discussions of democracy often begin with the ancient city-states of Greece. According to the Athenian legend of origin, the deities Poseidon and Athena offered gifts to the citizens to win the status of patron. Poseidon, the god of the sea, struck the ground with his trident, causing the earth to tremble and saltwater to spring forth. He was offering Athenians the power of the sea and strength in war, but they blanched at the taste of brine. Then Athena planted an olive seed, which sprouted into an olive tree. It offered shade for contemplation, olives for eating, and oil for cooking. Athena's gift was deemed superior, and the city took her name and patronage.

The Greek legend suggests a vision of democracy as tranquility, a life of thoughtful deliberation and consumption. Yet Athens had to win wars to survive. The most famous defense of democracy, the funeral oration of Pericles, is about the harmony of risk and freedom. Poseidon had a point about war: sometimes the trident must be brought down. He was also making a case for interdependence. Prosperity, and sometimes survival, depends on sea trade. How, after all, could a small city-state such as Athens afford to devote its limited soil to olives? Ancient Athenians were nourished by grain brought from the north coast of the Black Sea, grown in the black earth of what is now southern Ukraine. Alongside the Jews, the Greeks are the longest known continuous inhabitants of Ukraine. Mariupol was their city, until the Russians destroyed it. The southern region of Kherson, where combat is now underway, bears a Greek name borrowed from a Greek city. In April, the Ukrainians sank the Russian flagship, the *Moskva*, with Neptune missiles—Neptune being the Roman name for Poseidon.

As it happens, Ukraine's national symbol is the trident. It can be found among relics of the state that Vikings founded at Kyiv about a thousand years ago. After receiving Christianity from Byzantium, the Greek-speaking eastern Roman Empire, Kyiv's rulers established secular law. The

economy shifted from slavery to agriculture as the people became subject to taxation rather than capture. In subsequent centuries, after the fall of the Kyiv state, Ukrainian peasants were enserfed by Poles and then by Russians. When Ukrainian leaders founded a republic in 1918, they revived the trident as the national symbol. Independence meant not only freedom from bondage but the liberty to use the land as they saw fit. Yet the Ukrainian National Republic was short lived. Like several other young republics established after the end of the Russian empire in 1917, it was destroyed by the Bolsheviks, and its lands were incorporated into the Soviet Union. Seeking to control Ukraine's fertile soil, Joseph Stalin brought about a political famine that killed about four million inhabitants of Soviet Ukraine in 1932 and 1933. Ukrainians were overrepresented in the Soviet concentration camps known as the gulag. When Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union, Adolf Hitler's goal was control of Ukrainian agriculture. Ukrainians were again overrepresented among the civilian victims—this time of the German occupiers and the Red Army soldiers who defeated the Germans. After World War II, Soviet Ukraine was nevertheless subjected to a slow process of Russification in which its culture was degraded.

When the Soviet Union came to an end in 1991, Ukrainians again seized on the trident as their national symbol. In the three decades since, Ukraine has moved, haltingly but unmistakably, in the direction of functional democracy. The generation that now runs the country knows the Soviet and pre-Soviet history but understands self-rule as self-evident. At a time when democracy is in decline around the world and threatened in the United States, Ukrainian resistance to Russian aggression provides a surprising (to many) affirmation of faith in democracy's principles and its future. In this sense, Ukraine is a challenge to those in the West who have forgotten the ethical basis of democracy and thereby, wittingly or

unwittingly, ceded the field to oligarchy and empire at home and abroad. Ukrainian resistance is a welcome challenge, and a needed one.

THE APPEASEMENT TEST

The history of twentieth-century democracy offers a reminder of what happens when this challenge is not met. Like the period after 1991, the period after 1918 saw the rise and fall of democracy. Today, the turning point (one way or the other) is likely Ukraine; in interwar Europe, it was Czechoslovakia. Like Ukraine in 2022, Czechoslovakia in 1938 was an imperfect multilingual republic in a tough neighborhood. In 1938 and 1939, after European powers chose to appease Nazi Germany at Munich, Hitler's regime suppressed Czechoslovak democracy through intimidation, unresisted invasion, partition, and annexation. What actually happened in Czechoslovakia was similar to what Russia seems to have planned for Ukraine. Putin's rhetoric resembles Hitler's to the point of plagiarism: both claimed that a neighboring democracy was somehow tyrannical, both appealed to imaginary violations of minority rights as a reason to invade, both argued that a neighboring nation did not really exist and that its state was illegitimate.

In 1938, Czechoslovakia had decent armed forces, the best arms industry in Europe, and natural defenses improved by fortifications. Nazi Germany might not have bested Czechoslovakia in an open war and certainly would not have done so quickly and easily. Yet Czechoslovakia's allies abandoned it, and its leaders fatefully chose exile over resistance. The defeat was, in a crucial sense, a moral one. And it enabled the physical transformation of a continent by war, creating some of the preconditions for the Holocaust of European Jews.

By the time Germany invaded Poland in September 1939, beginning World War II, Czechoslovakia no longer existed, and its territories and resources had been reassigned according to German preferences.

Germany now had a longer border with Poland, a larger population, Czechoslovak tanks, and tens of thousands of Slovak soldiers. Hitler also now had a powerful ally in the Soviet Union, which joined in the destruction of Poland after invading from the east. During Germany's invasion of France and the Low Countries in 1940 and during the Battle of Britain later that year, German vehicles were fueled by Soviet oil and German soldiers fed by Soviet grain, almost all of which was extracted from Ukraine.

This sequence of events started with the easy German absorption of Czechoslovakia. World War II, at least in the form that it took, would have been impossible had the Czechoslovaks fought back. No one can know what would have happened had the Germans been bogged down in Bohemia in 1938. But we can be confident that Hitler would not have had the sense of irresistible momentum that gained him allies and frightened his foes. It would certainly have been harder for the Soviet leadership to justify an alliance. Hitler would not have been able to use Czechoslovak arms in his assault on Poland, which would have begun later, if at all. The United Kingdom and France would have had more time to prepare for war and perhaps to help Poland. By 1938, Europe was emerging from the Great Depression, which was the main force attracting people to the political extremes. Had Hitler's nose been bloodied in his first campaign, the appeal of the far right might have declined.

POSTMODERN TYRANTS

Unlike Czechoslovak leaders, Ukrainian leaders chose to fight and were supported, at least in some measure, by other democracies. In resisting, Ukrainians have staved off a number of very dark scenarios and bought European and North American democracies valuable time to think and prepare. The full significance of the Ukrainian resistance of 2022, as with the appeasement of 1938, can be grasped only when one considers the

futures it opens or forecloses. And to do that, one needs the past to make sense of the present.

The classical notion of tyranny and the modern concept of fascism are both helpful in understanding the Putin regime, but neither is sufficient. The basic weaknesses of tyrannies are generic and long known—recorded, for example, by Plato in his *Republic*. Tyrants resist good advice, become obsessive as they age and fall ill, and wish to leave an undying legacy. All of this is certainly evident in Putin's decision to invade Ukraine. Fascism, a specific form of tyranny, also helps to explain today's Russia, which is characterized by a cult of personality, a de facto single party, mass propaganda, the privileging of will over reason, and a politics of us-versus-them. Because fascism places violence over reason, it can be defeated only by force. Fascism was quite popular—and not just in fascist countries—until the end of World War II. It was discredited only because Germany and Italy lost the war.

Although Russia is fascist at the top, it is not fascist through and through. A specific emptiness lies at the center of Putin's regime. It is the emptiness in the eyes of Russian officials in photographs as they look into a vacant middle distance, a habit they believe projects masculine imperturbability. Putin's regime functions not by mobilizing society with the help of a single grand vision, as fascist Germany and Italy did, but by demobilizing individuals, assuring them that there are no certainties and no institutions that can be trusted. This habit of demobilization has been a problem for Russian leaders during the war in Ukraine because they have educated their citizens to watch television rather than take up arms. Even so, the nihilism that undergirds demobilization poses a direct threat to democracy.

The Putin regime is imperialist and oligarchic, dependent for its existence on propaganda that claims that all the world is ever such. While Russia's

support of fascism, white nationalism, and chaos brings it a certain kind of supporter, its bottomless nihilism is what attracts citizens of democracies who are not sure where to find ethical landmarks—who have been taught, on the right, that democracy is a natural consequence of capitalism or, on the left, that all opinions are equally valid. The gift of Russian propagandists has been to take things apart, to peel away the layers of the onion until nothing is left but the tears of others and their own cynical laughter. Russia won the propaganda war the last time it invaded Ukraine, in 2014, targeting vulnerable Europeans and Americans on social media with tales of Ukrainians as Nazis, Jews, feminists, and gays. But much has changed since then: a generation of younger Ukrainians has come to power that communicates better than the older Russians in the Kremlin.

The defense of Putin's regime has been offered by people operating as literary critics, ever disassembling and dissembling. Ukrainian resistance, embodied by President Volodymyr Zelensky, has been more like literature: careful attention to art, no doubt, but for the purpose of articulating values. If all one has is literary criticism, one accepts that everything melts into air and concedes the values that make democratic politics possible. But when one has literature, one experiences a certain solidity, a sense that embodying values is more interesting and more courageous than dismissing or mocking them.

Creation comes before critique and outlasts it; action is better than ridicule. As Pericles put it, "We rely not upon management or trickery, but upon our own hearts and hands." The contrast between the sly black suits of the Russian ideologues and propagandists and the earnest olive tones of Ukrainian leaders and soldiers calls to mind one of the most basic requirements of democracy: individuals must openly assert values despite the risk attendant upon doing so. The ancient philosophers understood that virtues were as important as material factors to the rise

and fall of regimes. The Greeks knew that democracy could yield to oligarchy, the Romans knew that republics could become empires, and both knew that such transformations were moral as well as institutional. This knowledge is at the foundation of Western literary and philosophical traditions. As Aristotle recognized, truth was both necessary to democracy and vulnerable to propaganda. Every revival of democracy, including the American one of 1776 with its self-evident truths, has depended on ethical assertions: not that democracy was bound to exist, but that it should exist, as an expression of rebellious ethical commitment against the ubiquitous gravitational forces of oligarchy and empire.

This has been true of every revival of democracy except for the most recent one, which followed the eastern European revolutions of 1989 and the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. At that point, as Russia and Ukraine emerged as independent states, a perverse faith was lodged in "the end of history," the lack of alternatives to democracy, and the nature of capitalism. Many Americans had lost the natural fear of oligarchy and empire (their own or others') and forgotten the organic connection of democracy to ethical commitment and physical courage. Late twentieth-century talk of democracy conflated the correct moral claim that the people should rule with the incorrect factual claim that democracy is the natural state of affairs or the inevitable condition of a favored nation. This misunderstanding made democracies vulnerable, whether old or new.

The current Russian regime is one consequence of the mistaken belief that democracy happens naturally and that all opinions are equally valid. If this were true, then Russia would indeed be a democracy, as Putin claims. The war in Ukraine is a test of whether a tyranny that claims to be a democracy can triumph and thereby spread its logical and ethical vacuum. Those who took democracy for granted were sleepwalking toward tyranny. The Ukrainian resistance is the wake-up call.

EARNEST STRUGGLE

On the Sunday before Russia began its latest invasion of Ukraine, I predicted on American television that Zelensky would remain in Kyiv if Russia invaded. I was mocked for this prediction, just as I was when I predicted the previous Russian invasion, the danger that U.S. President Donald Trump posed to American democracy, and Trump's coup attempt. Former advisers to Trump and President Barack Obama disagreed with me in a class at Yale University, where I teach. They were doing nothing more than reflecting the American consensus. Americans tend to see the war in Ukraine in the long shadow of the 9/11 attacks and the American moral and military failures that followed. In the Biden administration, officials feared that taking the side of Kyiv risked repeating the fall of Kabul. Among younger people and on the political left, a deeper unease arose from the lack of a national reckoning over the invasion of Iraq, justified at the time with the notion that destroying one regime would create a tabula rasa from which democracy would naturally emerge. The idiocy of this argument made a generation doubt the possibility that war and democracy could have something to do with each other. The unease with another military effort was perhaps understandable, but the resemblance between Iraq and Ukraine was only superficial. Ukrainians weren't imposing their own vision on another country. They were protecting their right to choose their own leaders against an invasion designed to undo their democracy and eliminate their society.

The Trump administration had spread cynicism from the other direction. First Trump denied Ukraine weapons in order to blackmail Zelensky. Then he showed that a U.S. president would attempt a coup to stay in power after an electoral defeat. To watch fellow citizens die in an attempt to overthrow democracy is the opposite of risking one's life to protect it. Of course, if democracy is only about larger forces and not about ethics, then Trump's actions would make perfect sense. If one believes that capitalist selfishness automatically becomes democratic virtue, and that

lying about who won an election is just expressing an opinion like any other, then Trump is a normal politician. In fact, he brazenly personifies the Russian idea that there are no values and no truth.

Americans had largely forgotten that democracy is a value for which an elected official—or a citizen, for that matter—might choose to live or die. By taking a risk, Zelensky transformed his role from that of a bit player in a Trump scandal to a hero of democracy. Americans assumed that he would want to flee because they had convinced themselves of the supremacy of impersonal forces: if they bring democracy, so much the better, but when they don't, people submit. "I need ammunition, not a ride" was Zelensky's response to U.S. urgings to leave Kyiv. This was perhaps not as eloquent as the funeral oration of Pericles, but it gets across the same point: there is honor in choosing the right way to die on behalf of a people seeking the right way to live.

For 30 years, too many Americans took for granted that democracy was something that someone else did—or rather, that something else did: history by ending, alternatives by disappearing, capitalism by some inexplicable magic. (Russia and China are capitalist, after all.) That era ended when Zelensky emerged one night in February to film himself saying, "The president is here." If a leader believes that democracy is just a result of larger factors, then he will flee when those larger factors seem to be against him. The issue of responsibility will never arise. But democracy demands "earnest struggle," as the American abolitionist Frederick Douglass said. Ukrainian resistance to what appeared to be overwhelming force reminded the world that democracy is not about accepting the apparent verdict of history. It is about making history; striving toward human values despite the weight of empire, oligarchy, and propaganda; and, in so doing, revealing previously unseen possibilities.

"LIVING IN TRUTH"

On the surface, Zelensky's simple truth that "the president is here" was meant to undo Russian propaganda, which was claiming that he had fled the city. But the video, shot in the open air as Kyiv was under attack, was also a recovery of the meaning of freedom of speech, which has been forgotten. The Greek playwright Euripides understood that the purpose of freedom of speech was to speak truth to power. The free speaker clarifies a dangerous world not only with what he says but by the risk he takes when he speaks. By saying "the president is here" as the bombs fell and the assassins approached, Zelensky was "living in truth," in the words of Vaclav Havel, or "walking the talk," as one of my students in prison put it. Havel's most famous essay on the topic, "The Power of the Powerless," was dedicated to the memory of the philosopher Jan Patocka, who died shortly after being interrogated by the communist Czechoslovak secret police. Putin, a KGB officer from 1975 until 1991, extends the sadistic tradition of interrogators: nothing is true, nothing is worthy of sacrifice, everything is a joke, everyone is for sale. Might makes right, only fools believe otherwise, and they should pay for being fools.

After 1991, the nihilism of late communism flowed together with the complacent Western idea that democracy was merely the result of impersonal forces. If it turned out that those forces pushed in different directions, for example, toward oligarchy or empire, what was there then to say? But in the tradition of Euripides or Havel or now Zelensky, it is taken for granted that the larger forces are always against the individual, and that citizenship is realized through the responsibility one takes for words and the risks one takes with deeds. Truth is not with power, but a defense against it. That is why freedom of speech is necessary: not to make excuses, not to conform, but to assert values into the world, because so doing is a precondition of self-rule.

In their post-1989 decadence, many citizens of North American and European democracies came to associate freedom of speech with the

ability of the rich to exploit media to broadcast self-indulgent nonsense. When one recalls the purpose of freedom of speech, however, one cares less about how many social media followers an oligarch has and more about how that oligarch became wealthy in the first place. Oligarchs such as Putin and Trump do the opposite of speaking truth to power: they tell lies for power. Trump told a big lie about the election (that he won); Putin told a big lie about Ukraine (that it doesn't exist). Putin's fake history of eastern Europe, one of his justifications for the war, is so outrageous that it provides a chance to recall the sense of freedom of speech. If one of the richest men in the world, in command of a huge army, claims that a neighboring country does not exist, this is not just an example of free expression. It is genocidal hate speech, a form of action that must be resisted by other forms of action.

In an essay published in July 2021, Putin argued that events of the tenth century predetermined the unity of Ukraine and Russia. This is grotesque as history, since the only human creativity it allows in the course of a thousand years and hundreds of millions of lives is that of the tyrant to retrospectively and arbitrarily choose his own genealogy of power. Nations are not determined by official myth, but created by people who make connections between past and future. As the French historian Ernest Renan put it, the nation is a "daily plebiscite." The German historian Frank Golczewski was right to say that national identity is not a reflection of "ethnicity, language, and religion" but rather an "assertion of a certain historical and political possibility." Something similar can be said of democracy: it can be made only by people who want to make it and in the name of values they affirm by taking risks for them.

The Ukrainian nation exists. The results of the daily plebiscite are clear, and the earnest struggle is evident. No society should have to resist a Russian invasion in order to be recognized. It should not have taken the deaths of dozens of journalists for us to see the basic truths that they were

trying to report before and during the invasion. That it took so much effort (and so much unnecessary bloodshed) for the West to see Ukraine at all reveals the challenge that Russian nihilism poses. It shows how close the West came to conceding the tradition of democracy.

BIG LIES

If one forgets that the purpose of free speech is to speak truth to power, one fails to see that big lies told by powerful people weaken democracy. The Putin regime makes this clear by organizing politics around the shameless production of fiction. Russia's honesty, the argument goes, consists of accepting that there is no truth. Unlike the West, Russia avoids hypocrisy by dismissing all values at the outset. Putin stays in power by way of such strategic relativism: not by making his own country better but by making other countries look worse. Sometimes, that means acting to destabilize them—for instance, in Russia's failed electoral intervention in Ukraine in 2014, its successful digital support of Brexit in the United Kingdom in 2016, and its successful digital support of Trump in 2016.

This philosophical system enables Putin to act but also to protect himself. Russians can be told that Ukraine is the center of the world and then that Syria is the center of the world and then again that Ukraine is the center of the world. They can be told that when their armed forces intervene in Ukraine or Syria, the other side starts killing its own people. They can be told one day that war with Ukraine is impossible and the next that war with Ukraine is inevitable, as happened in February. They can be told that Ukrainians are really Russians who want to be invaded and also Nazi satanists who must be exterminated. Putin cannot be backed into a corner. Because Russian power is equivalent to control over a closed media system, he can simply declare victory and change the subject. If Russia loses the war with Ukraine, he will just claim that he has won, and Russians will believe him or pretend to do so.

For such a regime to survive, the notion that democracy rests on the courage to tell the truth must be eliminated with violence if it cannot be laughed out of existence. Night after night, Kremlin propagandists explain on television that there cannot be a person such as Zelensky, a nation such as Ukraine, or a system such as democracy. Self-rule must be a joke; Ukraine must be a joke; Zelensky must be a joke. If not, the Kremlin's whole story that Russia is superior because it accepts that nothing is true falls to pieces. If Ukrainians really can constitute a society and really can choose their leaders, then why shouldn't Russians do the same?

Russians must be deterred from such thoughts by arguments about Ukraine that are as repulsive as they are untrue. Russian war propaganda about Ukraine is deeply, aggressively, deliberately false, and that is its purpose: to make grotesque lying seem normal and to wear down the human capacity to make distinctions and check emotions. When Russia murders Ukrainian prisoners of war en masse and blames Ukraine, it is not really making a truth claim: it is just trying to draw Western journalists into reporting all sides equally so they will ignore the discoverable facts. The point is to make the whole war seem incomprehensible and dirty, thereby discouraging Western involvement. When Russian fascists call Ukrainians "fascists," they are playing this game, and too many others join in. It is ridiculous to treat Zelensky as part of both a world Jewish conspiracy and a Nazi plot, but Russian propaganda routinely makes both claims. But the absurdity is the point.

Democracy and nationhood depend on the capacity of individuals to assess the world for themselves and take unexpected risks; their destruction depends on asserting grand falsehoods that are known to be such. Zelensky made this point in one of his evening addresses this March: that falsehood demands violence, not because violence can make falsehood true, but because it can kill or humiliate people who have the courage to speak truth to power. As the Russian thinker Mikhail Bakhtin

has observed, to live inside a lie is to become the tool of someone else. To kill or die inside a lie is even worse, in that it enables a regime such as Russia's to reconstitute itself. Killing for lies has generational consequences for Russia, even beyond the tens of thousands of dead and mutilated young citizens. An older Russian generation is forcing a younger one through a gauntlet, leaving the political terrain so slippery with blood that the young can never advance, and the old can hold their places until death. Ukraine is already governed by a generation that is accustomed to choosing its own leaders, an experience Russians have never had. In this sense, too, the war is generational. Its violence, in all its forms, is meant to eliminate the Ukrainian future. Russian state media has made Moscow's genocidal aspiration plain, over and over again. In occupied territories, Russians execute male Ukrainian citizens or force them to go and die at the front. Russians rape Ukrainian women to prevent them from wishing to have children. The millions of Ukrainians forcibly deported to Russia, many of them women with young children or of child-bearing age, have to accept what they know to be false to avoid prison and torture. Less dramatic but still significant is Russia's deliberate destruction of Ukrainian archives, libraries, universities, and publishing houses. The war is fought to control territory but also wombs and minds —in other words, the future.

Russia embodies fascism while claiming to fight it; Russians commit genocide while claiming to prevent it. This propaganda is not entirely ineffective: the fact that Moscow claims to be fighting Nazis does distract many observers from the fascism of Putin's regime. And before North Americans and Europeans praise themselves for winning the battle of narratives, they should look to the global South. There, Putin's story of the war prevails, even as Asians and Africans pay a horrible price for the war that he has chosen.

FAMINE AND FICTION

Putin's propaganda machine, like the rest of his regime, is funded by revenue from oil and gas exports. The current Russian order, in other words, depends for its existence on a world that has not made the transition to sustainable energy. Russia's war on Ukraine can be understood as a kind of preview of what uncontrolled climate change will look like: petulant wars waged by mendacious hydrocarbon oligarchs, racial violence instead of the pursuit of human survival via technology, shortages and famine in much of the world, and catastrophe in parts of the global South.

In Ukrainian history, political fiction accompanies political famine. In the early 1930s, when Stalin undertook what he called an "internal colonization" of the Soviet Union, much was expected of Ukraine's fertile soil. And when his plan for rapid collectivization of agriculture failed, Stalin blamed a long list of ready scapegoats: first Ukrainian communists, then imaginary Ukrainian nationalists whom the communists supposedly served, then imaginary Polish agents whom the nationalists supposedly served. The Politburo, meanwhile, enforced requisitions and other punitive measures that ensured that about four million Ukrainians perished. Those abroad who tried to organize relief, including the Ukrainian feminist Milena Rudnytska, who happened to be of Jewish origin, were called Nazis. This list of fantasy enemies from 1933 is startlingly similar to Russia's list today.

There is a larger historical pattern here, one in which the exploitation of the fruits of Ukrainian soil is justified by fantasies about the land and the people. In ancient times, the Greeks imagined monsters and miracles in the lands that are now Ukraine. During the Renaissance, as Polish nobles enserfed Ukrainian peasants, they invented for themselves a myth of racial superiority. After the Russian empire claimed Ukrainian territory from a partitioned Poland, its scholars invented a convenient story of how the two lands were one, a canard that Putin recycled in his essay last year.

Putin has copied Stalin's fantasies—and Hitler's, for that matter. Ukraine was the center of a Nazi hunger plan whereby Stalin's collective farms were to be seized and used to feed Germany and other European territories, causing tens of millions of Soviet citizens to starve. As they fought for control of Ukrainian foodstuffs, Nazis portrayed Ukrainians as a simple colonial people who would be happy to be ruled by their superiors. This was also Putin's view.

It appears that Putin has his own hunger plan. Ukraine is one of the most important exporters of agricultural goods in the world. But the Russian navy has blockaded Ukrainian ports in the Black Sea, Russian soldiers have set fire to Ukrainian fields, and Russian artillery has targeted grain silos and the rail infrastructure needed to get grain to the ports. Like Stalin in 1933, Putin has taken deliberate steps to risk the starvation of millions. Lebanon relies heavily on Ukrainian grain, as do Ethiopia, Yemen, and the fragile nations of the Sahel. Yet the spread of hunger is not simply a matter of Ukrainian food not reaching its normal markets. The anticipation of shortages drives up food prices everywhere. The Chinese can be expected to hoard food, driving prices higher still. The weakest and the poorest will suffer first. And that is the point. When those who have no voice die, those who rule by lethal spectacle choose the meaning of their deaths. And that is what Putin may do.

Whereas Stalin covered up the Ukrainian famine of the 1930s with propaganda, Putin is using hunger itself as propaganda. For months now, Russian propagandists have blamed a looming famine on Ukraine. The horror of telling such a lie to vulnerable African and Asian populations is easier to understand in light of the Putin regime's racist, colonial mindset. This is, after all, a regime that allowed an image of Obama fellating a banana to be projected onto the wall of the U.S. embassy in Moscow, and whose media declared the last year of the Obama administration "the year

of the monkey." Putin, like other white nationalists, is obsessed with demography and fears that his race will be outnumbered.

The war itself has followed a racial arithmetic. Some of the first Russian soldiers to be killed in battle were ethnic Asians from eastern Russia, and many of those who have died since were forcibly conscripted Ukrainians from the Donbas. Ukrainian women and children have been deported to Russia because they are seen as assimilable, people who can bolster the ranks of white Russians. To starve Africans and Asians, as Putin sees it, is a way to transfer the demographic stress to Europe by way of a wave of refugees fleeing hunger. The Russian bombing of Syrian civilians followed a similar logic.

Nothing in the hunger plan is hidden. At the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum in June 2022, Margarita Simonyan, editor in chief of the state-run network RT, said that "all of our hope lies in famine." As the skilled propagandist understands, the point of starving Africans and Asians is to create a backdrop for propaganda. As they begin to die, Ukrainians will be scapegoated. This might or might not work. All past fantasies about Ukraine and its foodstuffs were at one time believed by influential people. Russian propaganda today has an edge in the global South. In much of Africa, Russia is a known quantity, whereas Ukraine is not. Few African leaders have publicly opposed Putin's war, and some might be persuaded to parrot his talking points. Across the global South, it is not widely known that Ukraine is a leading exporter of food—nor that it is a poor country with a GDP per capita comparable to that of the countries it feeds, such as Egypt and Algeria.

There is some reason for hope. Ukrainians have been trying to communicate the reality of their position to people in the global South, so that they can speak the truth about Moscow's hunger plan and thereby make it impossible. And as Ukraine has gained better weapons from the

United States and Europe, Russia's hold on the Black Sea has weakened. In July, Ukraine and Russia signed agreements with Turkey that should, in principle, allow some Ukrainian grain to leave the Black Sea and feed Africans and Asians. Yet the day after it signed the agreement, Russia fired missiles at the port of Odessa, from which Ukraine ships much of its grain. A few days after that, Russia killed Ukraine's leading agribusinessman in a missile strike. The only sure way to feed the world is for Ukrainian soldiers to fight their way through the province of Kherson to the Black Sea and to victory.

THE LAST IMPERIAL WAR

Ukraine is fighting a war against a tyranny that is also a colonial power. Self-rule means not just defending the democratic principle of choosing one's own rulers but also respecting the equality of states. Russian leaders have been clear that they believe that only some states are sovereign, and that Ukraine is nothing more than a colony. A Ukrainian victory would defend Ukrainian sovereignty in particular and the principle of sovereignty in general. It would also improve the prospects of other post-colonial states. As the economist Amartya Sen has argued, imperial famines result from political choices about distribution, not shortages of food. If Ukraine wins, it will resume exporting foodstuffs to the global South. By removing a great risk of suffering and instability in the global South, a victorious Ukraine would preserve the possibility of global cooperation on shared problems such as climate change.

For Europe, it is also essential that Ukraine win and Russia lose. The European Union is a collection of post-imperial states: some of them former imperial metropoles, some of them post-imperial peripheries. Ukrainians understand that joining the European Union is the way to secure statehood from a vulnerable peripheral position. Victory for Ukraine will have to involve a prospect of EU membership. As many Russians understand, Russia must lose, and for similar reasons. The

European states that today pride themselves on their traditions of law and tolerance only truly became democracies after losing their last imperial war. A Russia that is fighting an imperial war in Ukraine can never embrace the rule of law, and a Russia that controls Ukrainian territory will never allow free elections. A Russia that loses such a war, one in which Putinism is a negative legacy, has a chance. Despite what Russian propaganda claims, Moscow loses wars with some frequency, and every period of reform in modern Russian history has followed a military defeat.

Most urgently, a Ukrainian victory is needed to prevent further death and atrocity in Ukraine. But the outcome of the war matters throughout the world, not just in the physical realm of pain and hunger but also in the realm of values, where possible futures are enabled. Ukrainian resistance reminds us that democracy is about human risk and human principles, and a Ukrainian victory would give democracy a fresh wind. The Ukrainian trident, which adorns the uniforms of Ukrainians now at war, extends back through the country's traditions into ancient history, providing references that can be used to rethink and revive democracy.

Athena and Poseidon can be brought together. Athena, after all, was the goddess not only of justice but of just war. Poseidon had in mind not only violence but commerce. Athenians chose Athena as their patron but then built a fountain for Poseidon in the Acropolis—on the very spot, legend has it, where his trident struck. A victory for Ukraine would vindicate and recombine these values: Athena's of deliberation and prosperity, Poseidon's of decisiveness and trade. If Ukraine can win back its south, the sea-lanes that fed the ancient Greeks will be reopened, and the world will be enlightened by the Ukrainian example of risk-taking for self-rule. In the end, the olive tree will need the trident. Peace will only follow victory. The world might get an olive branch, but only if the Ukrainians can fight their way back to the sea.