

WAR, SOLIDARITY, AND RESILIENCE. SOME REFLECTIONS FROM SWEDEN

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Abstract. In the essay, the author shares her reflections on the Russian full-fledged invasion of Ukraine from the position of a scholar who for many years has been working and living outside Ukraine. The essay presents the reactions of non-Ukrainian scholars and students to the war. The author questions the knowledge produced under the influences of quasi-colonial stereotypes, which is revealed through the discourses of dialogue and reconciliation that lack a deeper understanding of the Ukrainian context. The article also approaches the issue of the resilience of Ukrainian society that despite the hardships of war continues not only to fight but also to dream and work for its presence and future.

Keywords: Ukraine, war, reconciliation, dialogue, resilience.

It is perhaps too banal to start the war essay writing about one's life divided into 'before' and 'after'. Yet, nothing can describe the 24th of February 2022 better than the simple opposition of two short words. Living in Sweden for the last fourteen years did not prevent me from feeling devastated by horrendous news from home. Home, Ukraine, has never been so close as that early morning in late winter. Everything else lost its meaning and the world around me seemed to be virtual reality, fake decorations, that I had to endure. Real life was happening elsewhere: in the news from Ukraine and endless updates on social media. Friends writing on Facebook meant life. It was enough for me to see their presence online to feel better.



How can one prepare for war? Being a historian and teaching the histories of many wars did not help prepare me for what was coming. I remember friends who kept asking me if I, as a historian, thought the war was coming. No, there will be no war, I said. I was considering buying tickets to Ukraine. After years of isolation due to the pandemic, I missed Kyiv and was dreaming of coming to the Book Arsenal, one of the biggest literary events in Ukraine. My husband, though, was preparing for war. A week before the Russian invasion, when I was still optimistically thinking that there would be no war, as if the Russian tanks around my country did not exist, packages with protective glasses, first aid kits, and warm woollen socks were delivered to our house. However, even if my husband been preparing for war, the shock of the news that the war had started utterly shattered him. This makes me think that none of us can be fully prepared for war. It is so surreal and abnormal that our psyche protects us from cruel reality as long as it is possible.

Still, even if you cannot be fully prepared for war, the urge to act comes immediately and to masses of people. The big war started on Thursday and already on Saturday, we were in one of the churches in the centre of Stockholm that opened its doors for volunteers gathering all kinds of aid to Ukraine. Military essentials were especially appreciated, as well as warm clothes. We realised instantaneously that other people needed all the stuff my husband bought “in case of war” much more than we did in Sweden. We also hectically gathered everything we had to send to Ukraine, from skiing suits to books for children. Nobody knows why I grabbed the books. For me, books always had miraculous comforting power. Unconsciously I was reaching for things associated with comfort and normality, I wanted to send this normality to those who needed it most. It seems utterly stupid now, but there I was with warm clothes, first aid kits and a bag of books. The church was full of people. Not only Ukrainians, a lot of Swedes having zero knowledge of Ukrainian were there, too. They simply came and silently left their bags at the church doors. This solidarity and simple human kindness were so touching that I left the church in tears.

There was a lot of solidarity in those days. Friends were calling, friends were taking care of our daughter so that she could have some time without us and constant worries about the war. This human kindness was precious. On the third or fourth day of the war, we decided to collect some money to buy more stuff for the Ukrainian military. In less than a week, we collected one hundred thousand Swedish crowns (which is about ten thousand euros). It may seem a little, but for us, it was a fortune, as almost everything we got came from our friends and colleagues. The list of donors perfectly reflected the geographies and biographies of our lives: friends from Erasmus years in Spain and Germany, and colleagues from all around the world supporting our little initiative. It meant everything. It was more than money. Their

donations showed that they are on our side, on Ukraine's side. Our past life was still there, reaching out its hands through our friends to our new present, reminding us of the most precious thing in life: human connection.

Yet, not all the connections survived the new reality of February 2022. Those first days of the full-fledged invasion were fogged and hectic. I have forgotten many things from this time, but one thing that has got stuck in my memory is the reaction of some colleagues from the academic community who had already started thinking about how to 'reconcile' us, meaning Ukrainians and Russians. On the second day of the war, I was invited to speak at some panel where other Ukrainian scholars were initially supposed to take part. Because of the war, my Ukrainian colleagues were spending time in shelters hiding from Russian bombs and obviously could not participate in the panel. So, the organizers thought that it would be nice anyway to have some other Ukrainians who could speak instead. It was especially important for the organizers to have me communicate with scholars from Russia who, unlike the Ukrainian scholars in the cellars, were perfectly available for talks. I could be a good substitute because, as the colleague who invited me put it, "You are in Sweden. You are not touched by the war". Certainly, the bombs did not fall on me and I was not in the cellar. I was not 'affected', as they said. This talk about "substitution" reminded me of Stalin for whom every life was substitutable. I got outraged. I remember that at the end of our talk I asked the colleague what contemporary Ukrainian writers, artists, or intellectuals she knew. Whose names come to her mind when we talk about Ukraine now? There was silence in response. We ended our talk, recognizing on both sides that Ukraine was a terra incognita for the colleague and still that colleague thought that she was an expert on Ukrainian life and 'reconciliation'.

This 'reconciliation' discourse, which started directly after the invasion, continued for about a month. It was so violent that sometimes I could not breathe. How could I explain its entire inappropriateness? 'We are in a similar situation. My husband's grandparents are also from Ukraine, and we also feel a connection', said a colleague from Russia. How can you explain something to people who reject seeing the most basic things? All these people were working with traumatic pasts in their research, why were they not expressing understanding and sympathy talking with me? There is an essential difference between a story about one's 'husband's grandparents from Ukraine' and one's whole family being in Ukraine at the time that the weird conversation took place. I stopped explaining anything in March when I realised that even the genocidal violence of the Russian army in Bucha and Irpin did not change their discourse. They still refuse to see the difference between the killer and the victim. They were repeating the rhetoric about their suffering like some old song which was irrelevant in the new reality. I refuse to spend my energy on them.

I even started to understand where this discourse on ‘reconciliation’ comes from. This is an attempt to create a simulation of normality. As if making Ukrainians and Russians speak to each other will somehow create a reality without the war. This ‘subjugation to the dialogue’ is presented as ‘what one cannot not want’ to use Gayatri Spivak’s words (Danus, Jonsson & Spivak 1993: 42) that reveals the oppressive power which comes from outside the Ukrainian context. But whatever the attempts and motivations are, the simulation is just that— a simulation, it does not change reality. The war will not disappear even if the simulation works. I follow the suggestion of Gayatri Spivak that one’s way of dealing with ‘what one cannot not want’ is to persistently criticise it (Danus, Jonsson & Spivak 1993: 42).

In 2016–2020 I worked on a project where I was studying scholars’ responses to the Russian war against Ukraine. I conducted interviews with Ukrainian scholars, wrote articles, and presented results at conferences. What was my response to the war? Back in 2014 up to February 2022 I believed that the common sense would prevail. Russia did not need this war, thus Russia would eventually stop it. No one needed WWII-style in the 21st century. I was completely wrong. All my beliefs about war and peace proved to be wrong that crisp morning of the 24th of February.

With the Russian full-fledged invasion, everyone started to be interested in Ukraine. I was invited to dozens of talks. Most often they were very general talks to acquaint the public with what Ukraine is since it was on the news nonstop. I accepted all the invitations. It made me feel better since I was doing something. Working as a lecturer at the university, I do not have much time to invest in more meaningful volunteer work with people. Even the week of volunteering showed me that it is a full-time job if done seriously and I admire the volunteers even more than I did before. Instead of volunteering myself, I chose some volunteers and initiatives whom I trust and donate to them on regular bases. I also do what I am trained to: I talk. Maybe this way, I can escape thoughts about things I cannot fix. And I want to fix everything. I want to give home, shelter, and peace to all people I know, but my resources are limited, so I do what I can.

These talks about Ukraine showed one common thing: people know almost nothing about Ukraine. It seemed that all my colleagues’ and my efforts to spread knowledge about Ukraine after 2014, when the war started, proved fruitless. I repeated the same things again and again about Russian speakers in Ukraine, memory disputes, and history. It seemed that many people were surprised to hear that most Russian speakers in Ukraine identify themselves as Ukrainians and do not want Putin to rule over Ukraine, that millions of Ukrainians were in the Red Army fighting against Nazis, and that it was certainly not Lenin who created Ukraine (as the Russian president suggested).

Since February 2022, the discussions in history seminars have become unusually difficult and ever more related to the present, not to the past. Almost always while discussing contemporary history students direct their criticism against the USA and the West. Surprisingly, almost nothing has changed in these discussions, with the war happening only a two-hour flight away from Sweden. Students continue seeing the U.S. as the ultimate evil without having any idea what contemporary Russia is. And this is even though in the media there is daily coverage about Russia exterminating the population in the neighbouring country. There is nothing bad in criticising the U.S., of course, the whole university education is built on reasonable criticism of power. At least, ideally, universities should equip citizens with the knowledge and abilities to question the regimes of power. The problem is that within this system the critique is often limited only to one power and ignorant of the others.

In March, we read Timothy Snyder's 'Bloodlands' with my students. Those days the news was about the crimes against humanity committed by the Russian Army in Irpin and Bucha and we had to speak about the millions of people killed by the dictators on those very lands just several decades ago. These flashbacks from news reports and Snyder's text haunted me for weeks. I think they were haunting some of my students too because one student said: 'it is so cruel that we must read this text with you'. But another student said that Snyder's book was propaganda and that the Soviet Union was not that bad. Something similar I hear almost at every course when I speak about the Soviet Union. Long before the war, I tried to include a section about Soviet terror in every course of the history of the 20th century that I was teaching. And every time I had some sceptical students resistant to knowledge that did not confirm their ideological preferences. I wonder how one can teach the history of the 20th century and omit the part about Soviet terror. How is it possible to know about other genocides and have no idea about the millions killed by the Soviet state?

What can we as a scholarly community do considering some of the challenges I outlined above? As teachers, we should spread knowledge, not our ideological preferences. Those of us who vote for the leftist parties in the west must have the courage to speak about the crimes of communist regimes in their lectures, too. What can academia do for Ukrainian scholars? The answer is to give them more space, more resources, and more time. Give them the space to speak on their terms, without forcing them into suffocating embraces of a "dialogue" with colleagues who see no difference between the positions of people in Ukraine and in Russia, similarly as Vladimir Putin sees no difference between Russia and Ukraine. The least the scholarly community can do is listen more carefully to their Ukrainian colleagues and continue listening even when it becomes hard and uncomfortable.

Finally, what we all can do is learn from Ukraine. Learn how to be resilient as Ukrainians, how to believe in our values and our future. About a month after the invasion, my Ukrainian publishers wrote to me a message that they were still waiting for my manuscript. I signed a contract for a book on 22 February and was convinced that the new reality broke our agreement. However, my publishers were more resilient than me. They could see the future where I could see only darkness. It was my wake-up call. War can destroy everything, but we cannot allow it to destroy our future. We should all believe in the future of Ukraine. As Ukraine has a lot to teach, we should be ready to listen.

References:

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