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Being-against-Death

Words have weight and power; and so do narratives and ideas. They can shape and re-shape realities. They can reveal unheard and unthought of before aspects and dimensions of the world we live in, and in this sense, constitute truth for us; however, they can also, by means of the very same gravity conceal, distort or even destroy our view on reality and our vital relations with it and with ourselves. They are the basic means of our self-understanding, but they can also destroy the very fundamentals of it. We always find ourselves within a certain discursive space providing us with the basic ontological, existential, and axiological coordinates for our living and acting. These coordinates indicate and are expressive of our values and concerns, our plans and projects, our normative ideals, and basic attitudes toward ourselves, others, and strangers. They are informative of who we are by pointing out where we stand. They constitute a space of mattering:¹ the space within which our lives are possible only because first they are meaningful; that is, worth of standing for, *worthy of defending*. However, these spaces quite quickly can become taken for granted, then de-temporalized, de-historicized, petrified, and finally no longer expressive of our identities. What is the condition of possibility of our personal existence can very quickly turn into condition of its impossibility; causing either a feeling of alienation or, at best, tempting us to arrange our “best possible lives” in a state of “happy” and “fulfilled” existential-axiological inertia. (One can rightly ask which of these scenarios is worse.) In the latter case: We still *do* have values. We still *do* pursue truth and freedom. We still *do* respect human (and non-human) dignity. We still *do* cultivate pluralism of values. And yet, in order not to risk a potential de(con)struction of our solidified spaces of inertial comfort, we do it from a safe distance, in the mode of *as if*; more in a form of a beautiful rhetorical dance than in genuine efforts

1) See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, 10th printing (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), especially Part I, chapters 1 and 2.

of cultivation. That is, we are accepting the fact that we are no longer personally engaged in these constitutive spaces, we no longer treat them as demands, we no longer question them. We simply set them loose, let them be, and we neutralize them (to express it in phenomenological idiom). The only problem is that culture does not tolerate neutral spaces. It is always ready to fill them up with other concepts, narratives, stories which can easily, often in a very sophisticated way, distort our original concepts and values to the point where they are turned on their heads.

One of the contemporary ideas having enormous influence on our perceiving and experiencing of social-political reality was Francis Fukuyama's thesis proclaiming (evoking? performing? creating?) "the end of history." I believe there is no need here to either recollect the precise meaning of Fukuyama's theory (due to its enormous popularity), nor to list its shortcomings, which in fact, very quickly become clear to Fukuyama himself. What is certainly more interesting is to point out its double status. On the one hand, it is expressive of the intellectual climate of its times – a gradually disappearing sense of historicity. On the other hand (and in the apparent contradiction), it significantly contributes to this climate, it provides simple and digestible theoretical reasons for it. Having such reasons, we could pronounce, with a deep feeling of relief, that after all its deadly twists and bloody bacchanalia, History has eventually come to its own end. And we were post-historical animals, for better or worse. After a long journey, we were eventually at home. We were safe and sound. Except the fact that... we were not. What was taking place, in fact, was not history's termination, but rather our insistent and persistent exercise in self-de-historicization. We were eagerly marginalizing (if not even negating) our sense of being historically determined. We were eagerly and happily de-historicizing the world we have lived in.

There are, at least, three dimensions of this effective de-historicization. First, we were gradually losing the sense of community, the sense which should be genuinely and constantly actualized and re-actualized both synchronically and generatively. Second, as a consequence, we were effectively neutralizing all historical processes taking place right before our eyes (e.g., all processes of perpetuating colonialism – marginalization of particular social, sexual, ethnic minorities, or particular countries and regions, countless wars which are currently underway conducted in the name of economic, ethnic, religious reasons, etc.), up to the point of not noticing that the processes we considered as being a thing of the past, in fact, have never terminated. They only slightly changed their guise, become more ephemeral, disseminated, shadowy, but no less persistent, no less efficient, and no less dangerous. And we refused to recognize them until the moment when they eventually appear in the un-glory of its original form. Third, de-historicization culminated in narrowing the space of freedom – we fell into a form of fatalism which eventually deprives us of the basic sense of responsibility both in thinking and acting. This is the space that corrupt masters of propaganda of all sorts are waiting to furnish with their monstrous, perverted images, concepts, and ideas. Their monstrosity initially does not lie in their unacceptable content. Quite the contrary they are served in the simple, easily digestible, tempting form to convince us about their genuine "truth." They are apparently so simple, so acceptable, so obvious, so convincing – that we do not often even notice their performative power; that what, in fact, they do is an irresistible demand of our intellectual and ethical desertion – where we are no longer capable of right judgment with regard to what is true and what is false; what is right and what is wrong. They project for us a new, "brave" world, the world devoid of any profound contradictions and tensions; the world where a genuine cultivation (i.e., always demanding from us an effort, always carrying a risk, always engaging us in axiological tensions and conflicts) of our values is replaced by an illusion of agency expressing itself in a "free exchange" of opinions where everything is equally true and un-true, opinions so superficial that not even worth of defending (unless for purely egotistic purposes). It is the space where, to use a celebrated phrase by Hannah Arendt, "everything is possible, and nothing is true," the space of carnival illusion. Once this space is established, we become completely unprepared for an abrupt, violent arrival of the unthinkable, for the brutal shock of the Real.

According to Timothy Snyder, in the contemporary culture we can distinguish two basic forms of de-historicization. They are apparently opposite extremes of this phenomenon; and yet, they seem to work in tandem, and certainly for the same purpose. The first of them, so aptly expressed and also fueled by Fukuyama's theory, is driven by a teleological orientation. It does not exclude a future (neither does it negate the past), but it conceives it in terms of "more of the same." Simply put, what future is to bring with it is more rationality, more economic prosperity and well-being, and more liberty. "History" is the linear, necessary, or inevitable process of ever more advanced realization of these ideals; and after the collapse of communism there is no real alternative for this teleological narrative. Snyder calls this "the politics of inevitability," which in his words, "is a self-induced coma."² The politics of inevitability respects, indeed, the richness and variety of historical past.³ However, if there is only one scenario for what is to come then history is no longer seen as living reality consisting of possible futures. It becomes nothing else than a museum of monuments covered with dust. Simply put, it is "no longer relevant"; there is nothing we can learn from it.⁴ The consequences go without saying – while accepting the politics of inevitability we are less and less prepared for sudden, abrupt, and violent returns of the (repressed) past.

The apparent counterpart of this form of de-historicization is "the politics of eternity." While the politics of inevitability is based on a specific petrification of history, channeling it into a one-directional stream, the politics of eternity is a peculiar, arbitrary juggling with history. The actual past is of no relevance here, is not a real concern. The past is nothing more than a material for mythologizing efforts which are to serve particular political purposes. Politics of eternity "is concerned with the past, but in a self-absorbed way, free of any real concerns with facts. Its mood is a longing for past moments that never really happened."⁵ Furthermore, it is not only the actual past which is not relevant here. In fact, the proponents of the politics of eternity are so hypnotized with the mythologically projected past that neither the real present, nor the possible futures are of any interest. In this sense, within the politics of eternity, historicity is completely frozen out; there is only a mythologized past, there is no future, and therefore there is no real present. "If the politics of inevitability is like a coma, the politics of eternity is like hypnosis: We stare at the spinning vortex of cyclical myth until we fall into trance – and then we do something shocking at someone else's orders."⁶

How should we conceive the war in Ukraine? Why it is so important for the world-wide community especially when we remember that it is one among dozens of wars currently underway in different parts of the world? Why should we non-Ukrainians care? What does the fact (as much as its possibility) of that war tell us about Western culture? There were already hundreds of answers to these, and similar, questions. Let me make just three, in my opinion, essential points. Two of them were already, explicitly and implicitly, indicated above.

First, this war is a historical war, and it is war over history. This thesis, as trivial as it is, has at least three meanings. Firstly, it is a cultural confrontation between the two abovementioned de-historicized formations – inevitability (being a predicament of the collective West) and eternity (being essential for Russian imperialistic delusions). The collective West initially shocked (almost paralyzed) by the barbarian Russian aggression on Ukraine, is gradually waking up from its long-lasting a-historical dream, from this "self-induced coma." It learns anew to recognize all of the twists and turns of history, its non-linear, repetitive nature, and its different layers – each having its own dynamics and duration. And along with that, it learns anew its own role in these complex processes. This should lead to the profound re-thinking and then a positive re-construction of its very identity.

2) Timothy Snyder, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (London: The Bodley Head, 2017), 119.

3) See *ibid.*, 118.

4) *Ibid.*, 119.

5) *Ibid.*, 121.

6) *Ibid.*, 124.

Russia, on the other hand, is relentlessly confirming its essential *ahistorical* condition, is simply conducting yet another exercise of its own de-historicization. Hypnotized with the mythical projection of non-existing phenomena, incapable of solving its own internal problems and opening the sphere of possible futures; it covers the horrific nothingness of its own project with delusional images of its apparent grandeur.⁷ Secondly, this war is also a clash between two other cultural formations – imperialistic and post-colonial. It is a war for and about a real possibility for the self-determination of all nations and ethnic groups that were once subordinated to imperialistic powers and are still struggling with this inhumane heritage, still struggling to establish their own true identities. That is why, as one of the contributors to this issue claims explicitly, other post-colonial states should not be indifferent to this war. And that is why this war is, in a sense, not just one among many current military conflicts. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, while observing this war it is difficult not to see – how in the case of Ukraine itself, a vital sense of historicity is present and lived through both collectively and individually – how it is actualized on both the institutional and existential level. Ukrainians from within this dramatic present moment are not only capable of unfolding a deeper understanding of their past – both quite recent (struggle with Soviet empire and its heritage), and much older (the origins of their *ethos* – Cossacks Hetmanate) – but also project a future conducted not so much by some rigid teleologies, but rather by a commonly, synchronically, and generatively shared purpose: that of becoming free, self-determined people. Anyone who would spend just a short while studying their history would see immediately that this purpose (and not a *telos*) is a fundamental link connecting their past, present, and future(s). This lived through historicity indicates one of the senses in which Ukraine proves to be not only far more superior than its deadly, barbarian invader; but surprisingly, for many, it also proves to be more dynamic, vital and... mature than the collective West.

Second, this war is about *space*. Obviously not in a physical, geographical sense, but in the sense I was talking about at the beginning. It is the war about the *ethical* space. One of the main stakes of this war is whether we are condemned to live in a world where “everything is possible, and nothing is true,” and so, we are nothing more than just puppets in the “hands” of the anonymous forces (or demonic autocrats), and so there is nothing worth standing for, or there are some real possibilities at our disposal, possibilities worth undertaking, as much as there are some things worth our efforts, care, and cultivation. In the last three decades, Ukrainians have proven at least three times that the latter is to be the case. The current escalation of the war (launched by Russia in 2014) is yet another proof of that. However, we should not limit ourselves to the last three decades. In fact, the whole history of Ukrainian people – with all its dramatic ups and downs – is long-lasting proof of that. What is probably the most fascinating about Ukrainian nation is that it has constituted itself along a different trajectory than most of the modern nation-states. It was constituting itself from within the space inhabited by different ethnicities, languages, religious confessions, and so forth. And it was constituting itself as essentially different from the late-feudal model of society – the first early modern form of Ukrainian statehood (Cossack Hetmanate) can be understood as a military democracy. These two aspects – exposition to different cultural influences and a proto-democratic model of the political – led to construction of a nation based neither simply and exclusively on ethnicity, nor on language, nor on a particular religious confession, but rather on a way of life. In other words, it was meant not as a simplified *ethnos*, but first and foremost as *ethos*. The essential features of which were, from the very beginning, openness to cultural differences and influences, inclusiveness, and most importantly, a profound sense of *political engagement*. The whole dramatic history of

7) An emblematic situation took place during the obligatory conscription in Dagestan last September. While the group of Dagestani men refused to be enlisted, the officer in charge gave an inspirational talk about how important it is to fight for a glorious future of the Russian Federation. In response one of the revolting men cried out in desperation: “What future are you talking about?! There is not even the present here!!!”

Ukraine is defined by a constant actualization and re-actualization of this ethos, which when it had emerged on European stage was something exceptional, as it appears to be nowadays. What characterizes contemporary Ukrainian national identity is a cultural hybridity, the outstanding ability of a peaceful coexistence across all the ethnic, regional, linguistic, religious, and economic differences.⁸ This ability is supported/built upon a deep sense of social-political participation, which explicitly expresses itself in grassroots movements (characterized by an impressive level of self-organization) courageously standing out whenever the state structures attempt to radically alienate people from the political. The pluralistic, grassroots model of the political, the ability of Ukrainians to take a direct responsibility for their fate, and the deep sense of the spontaneous solidarity⁹ where everyone (regardless of the mentioned differences) is ready to stand for- and actively take part, creates a space founded upon an irresistible will of self-determination. It is the space within which values can have their place and importance. It is the space where the right judgment can be exercised over against the tricks of relentless, malicious masters of falsehood (one should add here that nobody is more efficient in exposing and ridiculing the tricks of Russian propaganda than Ukrainians). It is the space where the most fundamental words – which for Westerners have become old-fashioned and too exalted – such as freedom, truth, dignity, courage, sacrifice, patriotism, and indomitableness can regain their gravity and radiance. It is the space where the fight for existence is much more than just a matter of biological survival, but becomes again a profound ethical obligation. It is the space *worthy of defending*. And surprisingly for many egotistic Western intellectuals – it is the space which can serve as a model for a renewal (and perhaps with many regards an even better model of realization) of the European foundational ideals. This war reminds us how fragile our ethical spaces are, and how easily our ideals, when not cultivated, can become empty clichés. Ukraine for a long time was seen, unfairly and unjustly, as an empty space between Western culture and Russia. Now, it has become a mirror in which Europe can try to recognize its own origins, can see its own values promoted and defended, and it has a chance to wake up from its too long lasting, un-dogmatic dream.

Third, the war is about *life* and *death*. And it is so not only in a simple, biological sense. What is at stake is a positive re-construction of the discursive field indicated by these very notions. The unimaginable eruption of violence, which the Russian army brought to Ukraine, posed again the question (again apparently so trivial, and yet...), about the value of an individual life, and its fragility. Each lost life causes shock and poses question which cannot be answered. Each individual victim presents irrevocable loss. And yet, each lost life instead of breaking or compromising the spirit of Ukrainian resistance only strengthens it; each lost life increases number of Ukrainians who cannot imagine any territorial concessions or any compromises to the invader (as of now this number reaches more than 90%). This shows a very significant change in understanding life and death. In Western culture, the phenomenon of death for a very long time was either marginalized or, when specifically conceptualized and represented, fetishized. What Ukrainian resistance shows is yet another renewal of a forgotten ideal: an individual life is the highest, unnegotiable value. But the life of an individual deprived of dignity can be unbearable, as can be the life of a degraded, abased, and enslaved nation. There are some lines from which humans should not step back, lines on which they must stand in order to maintain their very identity, even at the most painful, highest price. “There is a fate worse than death.”¹⁰ In this sense, human existence

8) See Serhii Plokyh, *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), especially “Epilogue: The Meanings of History.”

9) This spontaneity is what distinguishes Ukrainian solidarity from the Polish phenomenon of the Solidarity movement whose formation took years. This difference was adequately described by Marci Shore in her brilliant book about the third Maidan. Marci Shore, *The Ukrainian Night: An Intimate History of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

10) Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 14.

transgresses the limitations of its finitude as implied by its essential relation to death, and reveals itself no longer as *Sein-zum-Tode*, but more radically as being-*against*-death. With all due respect to Heidegger's philosophy, it is too restrictive to put Ukrainian resoluteness into the proper perspective. There is this agitating image of a Ukrainian soldier – Oleksandr Matsievsky – taken captive by Russians and forced to dig his own grave... “*Slava Ukraini!*” Resoluteness; self-sacrifice; transgression of finitude; the glory of a free man...

This special issue of our journal is a small, symbolic tribute to Ukrainian people and their will to resolutely and courageously be against death and darkness. The whole issue is composed only of papers connected with the theme of the war and Ukraine (so we made an exception and skipped the Forum section this time). We start the Thematic Section with a strong and explicit statement – the barbarian Russian invasion into Ukraine is not just a war, in its deepest motivations it aims at an annihilation of a sovereign nation. The essay by one of the most prominent contemporary Ukrainian intellectualists – Mykola Riabchuk – presents a penetrating analysis of the legal possibilities of proving a genocidal character to the war against the Ukrainian nation. Even if there are some legal ambiguities, which may make the criminal case unprovable, a careful analysis of the statements of the representatives of Russian political regime presents no doubts as to “their explicit denial of Ukraine's existence and implicit denial of its right to exist.”

Julia Sushytska in her brilliant essay situates the war in the broader context of the postmodern propaganda which targets no longer the truth, but our very ability to give meaning to reality and to our experiences. In this way it de-subjectifies individuals and makes them unable to think and speak. It creates a reality in which “everything is possible, and nothing is true” and as such it prepares a ground for physical violence. However, the victims of such violence cannot be silenced – “it is necessary to talk about it.” So, the question is, as Sushytska argues, “not whether but how to speak” in order to make truth be truly heard. The author claims that it has to be done through indirect forms of speaking (such as metaphors, novels, and paintings), which make the truth inherent to them opaque, and which demands that we dwell in its reality.

The brutal reality of the war confronts us with many uneasy questions and requires different conceptualizations. Can we speak about an individual as an agent of their actions when it seems that history, violently returning, takes full control over human reality? In what sense is this war something more than just one among many wars? Why should post-colonial states and nations care about it? Why, in helping those falling victim of massive violence, are we still so selective in helping them? Is violence always and necessarily something unacceptable? These are just a few of the burning questions Deepa Majumdar poses and attempts to answer in her highly interesting and complex essay.

The sudden eruption of barbarian violence on February 24, 2022 has brought with it unimaginable darkness. Not only that of physical suffering, loss, and anxiety, but also intellectual darkness. How are we philosophers to explain and conceptualize this enormous violence? For weeks and months many of us were arrested, as it were, in darkness; lacking concepts which would help us to make sense of all this, many of us were able to respond only with shock and overwhelming anger. The essay by Sergii Shevtsov can be read as an almost personal journey through different conceptualizations of violence in order to cast some light on this inexplicable phenomenon. By the end of this journey he draws an outline of an ontology of violence, connecting it with arbitrary, one-sided, exclusive, dogmatic truth which does not tolerate a plurality of perspectives. The last passages of the essay are really an agitating personal confession on how violence – regardless of all the attempts at conceptualizing it, regardless of his contempt toward all violent impulses – haunts his mind in the confrontation with such enormous, massive atrocities. I am confident that the author is not the only thinker having this kind of experience. I know at least one more who shares it with him...

The question of origins of violence (in its overt and covert forms) is also a topic of the essay by Atish Das and Manhar Charan. Their analysis, strongly inspired by Gandhi's philosophy, shows how national imagination

and cultural imperatives originating from it provide solid grounds for different forms of violence. The very idea of a nation-state based on exclusiveness is nothing else than an artificial cultural product, an effect of “turning chance into destiny,” whose creation always necessarily coincides with an imaginative projection of otherness. “It is essential to ponder on the reactive qualities of violence, which is born out of necessity to secure cultural identity in a binary formation. Often these formations end up establishing an imaginary opponent, where the historicity is forgotten and only the symbolic projection remains.” It is difficult not to think here – even though the authors do not name it explicitly – about nationalistic Russian imagination, which essentially articulates itself in thinking precisely in terms of such violent binary oppositions, and constantly struggles with its mirror-images in the form of projected otherness. Are there any remedies here? The authors respond affirmatively and point at Ukraine as an example of positive recontextualization of the idea of a nation, which is inclusive, open, and heterogeneous.

The next two essays are expressive of (or respond to) characteristic of Ukrainians’ strategy of coping with what we could call imperialistic *episteme*, which can be articulated in the works recalling Russian philosophical conceptions, as well as in all forms of Russian manipulation of political propaganda and state media. In short, do not pass over in silence; confront, expose, deconstruct (and if possible, ridicule). Randall Auxier, following this strategy, analyzes the conception of one of the most infamous contemporary Russian thinkers – Aleksander Dugin. Auxier approaches Dugin’s thought with surprising kindness and interpretative empathy. All in order to better show not only its nationalistic and militaristic premises, but even more importantly that his work is “a patchwork of ideas that do not in fact fit together. ... A bit from here, a bit from there, and together, they form an intellectual version of Frankenstein’s monster. It may live, and grow in power, but it comes from the world of dead ideas.” Kostiantyn Raikhert, in turn, undertakes the analysis of the work of Andrei Smirnov who attempts to provide a philosophical foundation for the propagandist, political claim concerning the apparently artificial character of the Ukrainian nation. Raikhert proves step by step with an impressive patience (I have to admit) that Smirnov’s theory cannot prove or found anything more than its own formal shortcomings. It is built off poorly defined, or not at all defined, terms which in fact do not hold together.

We close the Thematic Section with a leap into history. Andrzej Gniazdowski in his impressively well-researched paper presents a comparative analysis of two phenomenological theorizations of the so called Russian world – by Max Scheler and Kurt Stavenhagen. It is quite telling how their phenomenological insights into Russian culture (formulated over a century ago) and its deadly, violent, imperialistic aspirations driven by its “corelessness” – that is, by never constituted (impossible?) identity, and by a “lack of self-evident self-reliance” – are still relevant today.

In the section “Discussion Papers” we publish two pieces: an interview with a Canadian philosopher – Aaron J. Wendland – who, deeply moved by the damage the Russian invasion has done to the Ukrainian academy, established in Kyiv the Centre for Civic Engagement. The CCE is meant to support Ukrainian scholars who decided not to leave their country, and in the next step it is to actively contribute to the reconstruction and development of higher education all around Ukraine. The second piece, by Tetiana Vlasevych, is a brief note on the state and prospects of culturology and philosophy of culture in Ukraine.



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