

Barbarism Begins at Home

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Russia's invasion of Ukraine is not a war against civilization. Here's why:

When Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy says that “we are defending European civilization,” he is articulating something very problematic.¹ Let us not forget that one of the absolute lowest points of barbarism in modern history was the Holocaust, whose epicenter was in the very heart of Europe. Of course, we need to do whatever we can to deal with the victims of this current war of aggression. From aid to fleeing refugees and injured and homeless people and animals, to artillery and air defense systems, we should do whatever we can—short of placing soldiers on the ground—to help the Ukrainians defend themselves. But we should also not fall for this old, zombie idea of civilizational clashes, the go-to explanation for scores of lazy journalists and college freshmen.²

Recall that in his efforts to buttress Syria's imperiled Assad government, Russian President Vladimir Putin bombed Aleppo and other Syrian cities with the same intensity with which he is now bombing cities in Ukraine.³ If we did not label him a war criminal then, but do so only now, what kind of signal are we conveying to the billions of souls in the so-called Third and Fourth Worlds about their, and their civilizations', relative worth?⁴ Similarly, there were stories early in the conflict of surrendered Russian soldiers, conscripts, being fed by Ukrainians and helped to call Mom back at home to let her know they were okay.⁵ We were told that many were demoralized and were misled by their superiors into believing they would be fighting Nazis.⁶ Of

course, there are some neo-Nazi elements in Ukraine, such as Sector Right and the Azov Battalion, but such groups exist in Russia as well. Putin's mysterious mercenary group, Wagner, has far-right neo-Nazi elements (the hint's in the name) and a founder who sports SS tattoos.⁷ Where is the civilizational boundary in this fight?

Thus, what separates civilization from barbarism is not found between countries but within each country.⁸ Viewed this way, we are not defending simply a besieged Europe and its "civilization," but something far bigger and more important. Just as there are Syrians who risked everything to demand democratic reforms, so too are there Russians who have stood up against Putin and his war on Ukraine.⁹ These are the true patriots. Noted American satirist Mark Twain famously defined "true patriotism" as "loyalty to the Nation ALL the time, loyalty to the Government when it deserves it."¹⁰ Our struggles are more universal than we imagine.

Further, if we use the language of defending some vaguely defined "Western civilization" or "values" against a despotic Oriental Eurasian civilization, we risk being in the realm of the Kremlin's current court philosopher, Aleksander Dugin.¹¹ Dugin is the man with Vladimir Putin's ear and, building on the ideas of Ivan Ilyin and Vladislav Surkov, he has weaponized postmodernism to argue that we are in a civilizational conflict, with Russia as an alternative to decadent Western liberalism.¹² In Europe, Putin consistently endorses fascist, right-wing, and fringe parties, such as those in Germany, Italy, Austria, and France. And at home, Putin refers ideologically to Ilyin, an early anti-communist philosopher who argued that fascism (with democracy as window dressing) would be the only solution for the future of Russia.¹³ It should

not be terribly surprising, then, that Putin is seen as an unofficial idealized leader of many white supremacists worldwide.

Ilyin is an example of how fascism can be brought back in the twenty-first century, if in a new postmodern context.¹⁴ Born in Moscow in 1883, he advocated a kind of Russian Christian nationalist mythos and finished his primary thesis, on “God’s worldly failure,” just before the 1917 Revolution. Exiled in 1922 by the newly formed Soviet state that he hated, Ilyin became a supporter of the likes of Benito Mussolini and advocated violent counterrevolution. He insisted that Russia should not be judged by what he called the “Communist danger” it represented at that time, but looked forward to a future in which Russians would liberate themselves with the help of Christian fascism. He had three important ideas:

- **Freedom is certainty.** Social mobility is essentially impossible because political and social systems are like the human body. Every citizen has a place in this larger body of the nation, and freedom means knowing your place.
- **Democracy is merely ritual.** The system should allow citizens to vote, but they only vote in order to affirm their collective support for a leader. In fascism, a leader is a people’s hero who emerges from fiction, enshrouded in myth.
- **The factual world isn’t real.** Ilyin believed that God created the world but burdened it with a mistake: facts and human feelings fragmented God’s intent and pushed Him further away. Therefore, Ilyin believed, the world was horrifying because we could not collectively agree on the veracity of various facts and, because we couldn’t agree on the truth of things, facts were valueless. Only a universal return to the Word of God could redeem the divine, and only virtuous Russia could lead the way.¹⁵

It's easy to see how Putin may find all of this comforting. Freedom comes from knowing your place. If a ruler can't abide by a true democracy, which could be a threat to him and his cronies, then elections can become mere rituals. If what a ruler is telling his citizens contrasts radically and demonstrably with what the facts show, then it's the factual world that is not real. Everything is subjective, based on belief, and a matter of implicit or explicit bias.

Note that the primary way that Russian disinformation and misinformation campaigns have worked during American elections has been by communicating the idea that things are not as they appear.¹⁶ The Russians supported Trump in 2016 and 2020.¹⁷ This help included various interventions, but the overarching message was that we should not trust what we see, read, and hear; that there are no good guys or bad guys, only our biases. The aim of these campaigns, it must be underlined, was not to convince, but to confuse. And the Russian trolls were able to manipulate many Americans into believing many false narratives.¹⁸ Even today, a large number of Americans still do not believe the truth about what actually happened in the 2020 presidential election.

The cross-pollination of old fascist ideas within a new postmodern context does not mean Putin and his ilk want us all to wear black uniforms and march in step. Instead, the goal seems to be a world where politics is all about emotivism, tribal allegiances, and the purging of essentialized enemies. Instead of considering our communities, we prioritize moral outrage against foreigners and the local citizens who are supposedly in league with them. We invest energy and fury online, instead of considering real policy solutions and the future of the republic, let alone the planet.

Our online “debates” follow patterns of agonistic ritual; the quality of the facts or content matter little in these exchanges because the goal is not really persuasion.¹⁹ Instead, the simulation of a debate ensues, and behind the performance of discourse, the real goals are simply the confirmation of tribal identities, group honor, loyalty—and the disheartenment of the enemy.²⁰ In this way, we waste our creativity and energy and none of us gets what most of us say we really want: a better society, a better government, and a good world. Instead, we secure things as they are, with the rich and powerful in place and an occasional flame-throwing personality who is all affectation with little actual efficacy.

Putin’s narratives of civilizational defense are a ploy to obscure his imperial goals. The best way to counter this offensive is to provide a better vision and a better way forward than what Russia offers. One problem is that much of the world the liberal Western order seeks to persuade holds legitimate grievances against our histories of imperialism, colonization, and exploitation. We cannot persuade without the necessary critique of our own reflexive neo-colonial narratives and attitudes, even if—especially if—they are masked by appeals to humanitarianism and collective defense.

We need to avoid thinking about civilizational or homogeneous ways of life. There is no real Ukraine, as there is no real America.²¹ Even as a committed anthropologist, I’m almost tempted to say that often it’s the opposite. There are no civilizations within borders to protect. Like the creepy cliché of Hollywood horror films, the threatening telephone call is coming from within our own house.²² The so-called “culture wars” are not specific to any one place, and

communities across the world are deeply divided by antagonisms and conflict. Our ways of life are replete and cross-cut with radical antagonisms. What is the Iranian way of life? Looking at the news, it should be clear: it's one big struggle. But it's the same with Russia. Predictably, the Kremlin proposes some form of an "authentic" Orthodox way of life—one that is specifically Russian. Don't believe it. There's tension just under the surface. Just like in China, or India. Or the United States.

In this way, a "clash of civilizations" is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere in particular.

So, let us not talk about Ukrainian or Russian or Iranian culture and society without this reflection. Instead, we should be asking, "What are the conflicts within their societies?" Iranians, for example, have clearly shown that they do not need to import feminism, or the concepts of democratic values and human rights, from the West. Those ideas are already there, and have been there for a very long time. So, instead, consider what you are struggling for in your own society, and what versions exist elsewhere. Can you help bridge these two?

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