

The 2022 war between Russia and Ukraine: lessons for Western democracy.

The destructive and criminal war by Vladimir Putin - the 21st century “Tsar of Russia” - against Ukraine has shocked us all, despite the warnings our intelligence services gave us. The destruction, the cruelty, and the barbarity in the middle of Europe has left us incredulous, almost disbelieving what our news media are revealing. To respond with grievous anger and rage at such a war - and our helplessness to stop it - is only too understandable, though worse, and far longer, human atrocities, in which we are also entangled, are going on in many other parts of the world. It’s perhaps because Ukrainian families are so similar to ourselves that we are so affected.

It is difficult to avoid demonising Putin. It was Lord Acton who famously declared: “All power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely”. Putin has been in power for some twenty years and his position and influence in Russia is seen to be one now of absolute dictatorship. Poland has dubbed him “the new Hitler”! But we also need to try to understand Putin and the history of events that led up to the war. We should certainly differentiate between the “criminal” Putin and the nation of Russia itself. Putin may be a war criminal but that doesn’t mean we should abandon all reason. In trying to understand the events unfolding every day on our television screens. The Russian perspective may, perhaps, also have something important to teach us about European and Western democracy.

Super powers mirror each other in many ways, as did the USSR and the United States in the Cold War. We overlook what they also bring from their own perspective. Western psychology - and particularly psychoanalysis - has explored projective processes extensively in individual psychology but it is a phenomenon that also occurs in groups and between tribes, nations and cultures as well. All groups, of whatever kind have a shadow, a blindness as well as enlightenment. This was particularly the case in the past when it was quite clear the two super-powers read - or misread - each other’s intentions in the light of their own values and preoccupations, and it has always been a driving force in imperial and colonising impulses. Russia today may have an understanding of social forces from its Marxist experience but it lacks a democratic instinct, while the West needs continually to review its understanding of democracy, what it really is, and what it has to offer a beleaguered and confused world.

Jean Gebser and the meaning of history

Human history may be about the rise and fall of civilisations but we are beginning to appreciate that it is not just about the actions of humanity. “Big History” now thinks in terms of the 4.5 billion years of the Earth rather than the few thousand we have traditionally documented. ¹ At the same time we are beginning to acknowledge the importance of climate change and environmental issues as the greater context for any effort to understand ourselves in this twenty-first century. It was E.H. Carr who suggested that our reading of history tells us as much about the present as the “past”. ² But, perhaps, it is also time to view history itself differently, not just about the development of “civilisations” in time and space, but as the unfolding of consciousness.

After the profound cultural trauma of the First World War Oswald Spengler drew attention to what he termed, in the title of his massive work, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, translated as *The Decline of the West*. ³ He predicted that by the year 2000 Europe would enter its greatest period of decline, followed by what he called “Caesarism”, a protracted dictatorial government of some 200 years. But after WW11 another German - a poet and cultural philosopher - wrote his own two-part *magnum opus*, *Ursprung und Gegenwart*, entitled - in its English translation - *The Ever Present Origin*. ⁴ Jean Gebser, contrary to Spengler’s pessimistic view, suggested that out of the West’s decline a new spirit of global psychological and social integration could be seen emerging - which Spengler, as a fellow cultural historian, and contrary to opinion, might actually have agreed with. In his comprehensive book Gebser explored this idea of the evolution of consciousness in all the arts, sciences, and social and cultural forms that led up to European “civilisation”.

Gebser suggested that, while the forms - or structures - of consciousness corresponded to “periods” of our history, they also go beyond them. He identified these structures as

¹ See Fred Spier, 2011, *Big History and the Future of Humanity*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, Cynthia Stokes Brown, 2007, *Big History: from the Big Bang to the Present*, New York: the New Press, and David Christian, 2011 (2004), *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History*, Foreword by William H. McNeill, Berkeley, University of California Press

² E.H.Carr, 1961, *What is History?* London: Penguin

³ Oswald Spengler, 1991 (1926), *The Decline of the West*, abridged edition by Helmut Werner with Introduction by H. Stuart Hughes, Oxford, OUP.

⁴ Jean Gebser 1984 (1949 and 1953) *The Ever-Present Origin: Part One: Foundations of the Aperspectival World: A Contribution to the History of the Awakening of Consciousness, Part Two: Manifestations of the Aperspectival World: An Attempt at the Concretion of the Spiritual*, translated by Noel Barstad with Aldis Mickunas, Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press

archaic, magic, mythic, mental, and integral. Ken Wilber, the American philosopher of the Perennial wisdom - and author of the 1977 book, *The Spectrum of Consciousness* - drew attention to Gebser and to these forms of consciousness in his early and later writings, while it was Georg Feuerstein, an authority on Hindu Vedanta and Yoga, who described them, in the title of his study of Gebser, as *Structures of Consciousness* (1989).⁵ For Gebser these five structures are nested, rather than linear, and continue to live within us now. They condition our actions and thinking more than we realise.

Structures of consciousness

The “archaic” refers to an unconscious that corresponds to a primordial time when we were struggling to emerge as a species in nature; the “magical”, to a time of egolessness and interweaving with nature when space and time were still unfocused; the “mythic” consciousness emerged when the climate was warm enough to allow us to differentiate more from nature and establish our own human culture, including the growth of villages and cities, along with agriculture and empires; with the development of the “mental” structure we evolved at a faster rate, Western scientific, technological, modern culture was born and we became highly differentiated as a species. The “integral” structure is less a discrete form of consciousness but more the re-integration of all five structures, and which constitute a major step in human cultural evolution. It is where we find ourselves now. Wilber describes our present progressive and integral form of consciousness as “vision logic”, or creative, network logic.

These broad generalisations are viewed more as a fluid development, when one form flows into another. It is difficult to separate them off and they continue to influence and guide how we live now. Moreover, we can see how each structure has positive and negative - or wholesome and unwholesome - qualities. For example, the mythic structure is more in touch with the sacredness of life, and while this, historically, involved ritual and ceremonial, humanity remained open to the cosmic and religious. All life was infused with a sense of the divine. On the negative side the mythic structure could involve the misuse of power, the building of dominator empires, and the deployment of people *en masse*, with too little account taken of the individual.

⁵ See Ken Wilber 1996 (1981) *Up From Eden: A Transpersonal View of Evolution*, Wheaton, Illinois: Quest and 2001 (1995) *Sex, Ecology and Spirituality, the Spirit of Evolution*, Boston, Shambhala and Georg Feuerstein, 1987, *Structures of Consciousness: the Genius of Jean Gebser - An Introduction and Critique*, California: Integral Publishing

With the evolution of the mental structure of consciousness modern “human nature” had arrived, as it were, but, with the development of our rational capacity and the abandonment and denial of all things mythological and divine, we found ourselves disassociated from nature altogether - and from ourselves. Human nature became anthropocentric and narcissistically self-centred. I wonder whether, in the civil war between Russia and Ukraine - aside from the criminal invasion of Ukraine by Putin - the distinctions between mythic-minded Russia and rational Europe are being played out in the conflict between an authoritarian regime and the nationalist, more democratic Ukrainian spirit, as well as in the sacred and secular themes Russia and Europe can be said to represent.

Russia and Mikhail Gorbachev

We should make an effort to see current events from a Russian perspective as well as our own. Vladimir Posner, the Russian/American/French journalist, in his 2018 Yale lecture, reminded us that, in all its thousand year history, Russia has had no experience of democracy. ⁶ In England we had our bloody and fiercely fought “revolution” - aka the Civil War - in the seventeenth century, which was followed in the eighteenth by the American and French Revolutions, while in the nineteenth all Europe was ablaze with nationalist revolution at different times. Russia may have had its own in 1917 - also a civil war - but their communist revolution, while drawn to the utopian but ethical Marxist teachings of a classless society, resulted in the replacement of one autocratic paternal government by another, a totalitarian and dictatorial regime.

Posner, from his personal experience of both the United States and the Soviet Union, also pointed out that, despite the Cold War and their opposing political ideologies, the Soviets admired much about America. This was evident, perhaps, in the Perestroika and glasnost of Mikhail Gorbachev, when he extended a hand to Reagan and the West, signalling the possibility of cooperation between the two political traditions of liberal capitalism and ethical socialism, but symbolised ironically by the eventual establishment of MacDonalds fast-food outlets in Moscow and other Soviet cities. More importantly the Berlin Wall came down. But, instead of respectfully welcoming these momentous gestures, Reagan, Thatcher, and other Western leaders looked upon it as the defeat of the Soviet Union and

⁶ YouTube, 2 October, 2018 , Vladimir Pozner: how the United States created Vladimir Putin.

the victory of the liberal West. They thought principally in conflict, or oppositional, terms. With the “collapse” of the Soviet Union the Western leaders lost the chance to make a real connection between the super powers, and, therefore, hope for a better future for the Earth. The global awareness of Reagan and Thatcher did not take them beyond their ideological commitment to a neoliberal economics.

Part of the agreement for East and West in Gorbachev and Reagan’s time was to recognise the spheres of influence of both - the Soviets and NATO would keep to their own domains. But, under Bill Clinton’s second administration, NATO’s boundary agreement was not kept to, thereby increasing Russia’s security fears as well as their growing distrust of America and the West. This was especially important for Russian territorial security as Hitler had come within 100 miles of Moscow in the Second World War and Russia had lost some twenty-five million men in defeating him. Russia may be characterised as a bear but it is a vulnerable bear with a soft belly.

On a personal note, when, in the late sixties and seventies, as a student, I was hitching around Europe and meeting people from all countries, strangely, I never met any Russians. I was sad about this, but also curious, particularly as I have always thought of Russian culture as an integral part of Europe - their novelists, dramatists and poets, their music, their philosophy and science, their religion and instinctive spirituality, are part of what we grew up with. My experience as a student made me wonder if there was something about the Russian People that separates them off from the rest of Europe, apart from their autocratic political regimes.

Russia and the European Enlightenment tradition

In Europe and the West we think that Russia has much to learn from us. The Enlightenment saw the emergence of modern rational science and liberal democracy, which the West, in its hubris, assumes is the blueprint for all cultures across the globe. While there may be some universal truths in the psychological and political domains of modern culture, it does not imply the imposition of those values directly on others, whose cultural history - or structure of consciousness - may not lead, automatically, to their acceptance. For the Russians it may be they associate NATO with a European Enlightenment they are ambivalent about because of what they see as its exclusively rational, secular, and materialist values. The West’s materialism may be seductive and

sought after but, at the same time, the seeming lack of ethical and spiritual values in present Western civilisation may be quite intimidating and alien.

The Western Liberal tradition

The political theorist, Francis Fukuyama, whose book *The End of History* gave seeming ammunition to the the triumphalism in the West that greeted the collapse of the Soviet Union, has just written *Liberalism and its Discontents* in which he reappraises liberal democracy in the light of the criticisms it has received in recent years from both right and left of the political spectrum.⁷ He prefers to write of the classical, or “humane”, liberalism which, he believes, is under severe threat in the world today. He thinks that while liberalism was once taken for granted, it’s virtues need to be reassessed and “celebrated”, though any reassessment must take account of its misuse in practice today.

By “liberalism” he refers to “the doctrine that first emerged in the seventeenth century and that argued for the limitations of the powers of governments through law and ultimately constitutions, creating institutions protecting the rights of individuals living under their jurisdiction.” The centre-left wings of America and Europe have been critical of liberal democracy because of its failure in practice to extend these rights to the whole of society, not just the “elite”, a criticism which also lies behind the emergence of populism. Fukuyama also differentiates it from the ideology of neoliberalism or the withdrawal of government altogether: “Classical liberalism is a big tent that encompasses a range of political views that nonetheless agree on the foundational importance of equal individual rights, law, and freedom”.⁸

Fukuyama is convinced that we shouldn’t abandon liberalism but we do need to “moderate” it. I would add, that apart from extending the use of law to guarantee individual and group rights across society we need to re-examine what we mean by such terms as “law” and “freedom”. For instance, do we not need to consider the moral and universal source of human law? And is freedom something to be desired for the individual? Should we not re-examine what we mean by an “individual”, in the light of social awareness today in the West and the wisdom and insights coming from non-occidental thinking and practice about the nature of mind?

⁷ Francis Fukuyama, 2022, *Liberalism and its Discontents*, London: Profile Books.

⁸ Ibid. p vii

John Gray also made the important point in *Two Faces of Liberalism* that “the liberal state originated in a search for *modus vivendi*”.⁹ In fact the spirit, and project, of toleration had its source in sixteenth century Europe. Today this “project” is just as important: “the task we inherit is refashioning liberal toleration so that it can guide the pursuit of *modus vivendi* in a more plural world”.¹⁰ This implies that, while we in the West would do well to remember the importance of toleration in our own societies, we should be careful how we advocate it for cultures different - in terms of consciousness - from our own. It is not in the spirit of democracy to make it into an ideology and thrust it upon others. Far better would be to focus on cultivating it in our own back yards. This would be more of an example to the rest of the world if we were to do so.

We may be able to show the world the benefits of democracy and the democratic spirit. But, at the same time, Russia’s emotional and spiritual values remind us of what we lack in our own modern way of life. Western science, after all, invented the weapons with which Putin is trying to subjugate Ukraine. Our industrial, technological society invests hugely in its arms productivity and is actually an example to the world in its culture of hostility and aggression. For instance, we have recently used our military technology very destructively in the Gulf, Afghanistan and Iraq - before Putin’s wars of destruction - which is to say nothing of our imperialist past and present ventures. In the west we have forgotten the universal, ethical and poetic values of a mythic culture, which must also bear on our denial of the current climate and ecological crisis that now threatens to erase us all.

Democracy and war

It is often said that democracies do not go to actual war with each other. This may be true but Ukraine has shown how we need to be prepared to fight and die for our beliefs. It is often argued that the West, and particularly Europe, has become too soft and assumed that a peaceful and materially prosperous life is normal. Surely, the lesson to be learnt is that we need to stand up for our democratic way of life, and be prepared to die for it, but, at the same time, we cannot assume that other countries are ready to adopt it. Moreover the lesson from the present conflict is that arms are to be used defensively, and tested with minimal harm to others and to the environment. We also need to realise that the

⁹ John Gray, 2000, *The Two Faces of Liberalism*, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press

¹⁰ Ibid. p 1

standard of living we take so much for granted can no longer be guaranteed. Perhaps this realisation is all the more crucial, given the context of the greater climate and ecological crisis we have caused.

Liberal democracy has come in for much criticism in this post-colonial and post-modern age. But its failings do not mean it is to be condemned outright. If the war in the Ukraine leads us to reassess the value of the democratic way of life and its freedom, the quality of that freedom needs to be constantly under examination and not mindlessly taken for granted. Putin's invasion of Ukraine has shocked us, as has the Ukrainian people's readiness to fight for democracy, whatever the cost. One is reminded of the Jewish realisation that the Temple in Jerusalem, which was destroyed in 74 CE, is not the building but the people. Similarly the Roman Empire may have declined but its spirit lived on in Europe, despite the sack of Rome in 375 CE. There are immaterial and eternal values which survive the worst material destruction and human suffering.

Gorbachev and the “three challenges of our time”.

Whatever arguments we proffer in favour of the democratic way of life we should never lose sight of the big picture of our times. In his *Manifesto for the Earth* it was the statesman, Mikhail Gorbachev, who set out the “Three Challenges Facing Our Time”.¹¹ These demonstrate that Gorbachev had an understanding of global and geopolitical needs not altogether shared by Reagan and Thatcher. The first challenge concerned world security - “to maintain world peace and direct every effort of the international community towards defining so-called local conflicts”. This applied both to those with chemical and nuclear capability. The second challenge concerned world poverty - poverty was something Gorbachev had had extensive experience of in his childhood. “The fortunate ‘golden billion’ must awaken to the sufferings of half the world's population who live on one or two dollars a day and frequently have no access to clean drinking water or clean sanitation”.¹²

The third challenge is ecological. “We can see with the naked eye that climactic changes are taking place on the earth, that the number of natural disasters - hurricanes, storms, floods and droughts - is increasing, that many plant and animal species are dying out,

¹¹ Mikhail Gorbachev, 2006, *Manifesto for the Earth: Action now for peace, global justice and a sustainable future*, Forest Row, East Sussex: Clairview.

¹² Ibid. p 6.

that the polar ice caps are melting, and that the oceans are becoming increasingly polluted while the forests are being ever more rapidly destroyed”.¹³ These three challenges are closely interconnected for if one is not met it will be difficult to achieve the other two. They face us both as individuals and as governments and international organisations.

Gorbachev was brave and foresighted for his country and the whole world. But for him the iron curtain might not have been drawn back. He showed us the face of the more humane tradition of Russian culture. He recalled that in a speech honouring the poet Alexander Pushkin he gave in 1880, Fyodor Dostoevsky spoke about “the world-embracing fellow-feeling of the Russian soul”. Gorbachev was the leader of one of the world’s two super-powers in the 1990s and recommended a “global glasnost - openness, transparency, and public dialogue. To build a consensus around these challenges, he advocated a policy of ‘preventive engagement’ “so that military force ceases to be an option”. This was a message as much for the West, as for Vladimir Putin.

The theme of war and peace touches all civilisations. India, for instance, holds dear their timeless account of the king, Arjuna, and his teacher, Krishna, in *The Bhagavad Gita*. Arjuna is about to go to war but is fearful and trembling at the prospect as he surveys the forces lined up against each other. Krishna reminds him of his honour and duty as a leader and of the universal truths about life and death we forget so easily in the midst of the turmoil of life. As I watch the news every day from Ukraine, cataloguing the suffering and pain of the people and their will to fight on, I am reminded of the words of Krishna in the second chapter, “Self-Realisation”, in *The Bhagavad Gita* as he addresses Arjuna:

You speak sincerely but your sorrow has no cause. The wise grieve neither for the living nor for the dead. There has never been a time when you and I and the kings gathered here have not existed, nor will there be a time when we have ceased to exist.¹⁴

¹³ Ibid. p 6

¹⁴ *The Bhagavad Gita*, 2007, 1985, Introduced and translated by Eknath Easwaran, Nilgiri Press, p 89.

