



A Cataclysmic Invasion on the Heels of a Global Pandemic

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News of more deaths, destruction, refugees, people being maimed or rendered homeless, and of more lives and families being ripped apart continue to flow in daily as the Russian invasion of Ukraine enters the second month. With thousands dead, dying, and fleeing for safety away from ruined cities, the lives of generations of Ukrainians—and even Russians—who will survive this assault, will not be the same again. We also hear about the possibility of more intense and destructive attacks and of ultrasonic missiles, carpet bombing, chemical and biological weapons, and even nuclear bombs and World War III. It is not just Ukraine, Russia, and Europe, but the whole world seems to be in danger with crises of sorts, even as it is yet to recover from the impact of a deadly pandemic. Meanwhile, mediations continue, and they are the only hope even as they also seem to fail.

For many around the world, it is an invasion and not a war, one that is waged by one man: Vladimir Putin. Putin may be representative of a collective of interests in Russia. But it is Putin's invasion of Ukraine, and he has his own reasons—whether the rest of Russia owns them or not. It will last as long as he wants and will remain as his invasion in history. His hold over an array of legitimating doctrines, such as Sovietism, nationalism, military patriotism, Russian Orthodox fundamentalism, etc., for twenty-two years has turned him into someone with enormous vertical and personalized power, capable of shattering millions of lives and threatening the future of the entire world.

This is not the first time that despots have inflicted such massive human suffering. It is also not the first time that such invasions have occurred. Let us also not forget that some such extremely oppressive and brutal regimes around the world have also been supported and perpetrated by some of the most boastful democracies and champions of human rights and freedom. What perhaps stands out as an aberration is that alongside vibrant democracies, broader spaces for expressions of liberal thought and assertions of individual and collective freedom, the twenty-first century world has also turned out to be a space for despots and authoritarian regimes, and the associated ideologies of unbridled greed, hate, and privilege. With limitless power

and access to weapons of mass destruction, the fate and future of the world and our lives now seem to hang on the impulses of sadists, narcissists, and power-addicts. Populism, regressive rightwing ideologies, and exclusionary versions of nationalism seem to be working together to weaken democracies, nurture tolerance for injustice, and legitimize these aggressive assertions of the powerful. To that extent, Putin may also be seen as a product and a symbol of these regressive and detrimental trends of our time.

Amidst all the distressing news, we see images of thousands of Russians demonstrating on the streets of Moscow and St. Petersburg who are aware of the prospect that this might get them sentenced to fifteen years in jail, and we hear about ordinary Ukrainians taking up arms to defend their country. We also hear about the American veterans reaching out to train them, the hundreds of aid and healthcare workers, and of many people from Europe and the US joining the resistance. We have also heard about Christian and Sikh communities offering shelter, food, medical aid, and assistance to escape even as the hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church justifies the invasion. Amidst all the trauma and tragedy, these spontaneous expressions of indignation and solidarity, and of empathy and compassion, do indeed kindle hope. One would hope that such expressions of solidarity greet the millions of people suffering through similar situations of invasion, occupation, aggression, and massacre in parts of the Middle East and Africa, and in places far away from the “centers of the world,” such as Haiti, Colombia, Myanmar, and Afghanistan, etc. In most of these cases, the silence is loud and apathy conspicuous. But as Martin Luther King Jr., warns: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.”

As we get to this crisis moment, we also see this as a moment of reckoning. If vertical and centralized powers can threaten to destroy, people’s power can protect, resist, rebuild, and nurture life. Let us hope that this would also be a moment for our generation to reject the fascination with power and violence, kleptocracy, and ideologies of superiority based on skewed anthropological theories and the glorification of narcissistic leaders. Our common future cannot and should not be subject to the whims and fancies of the powerful, but instead be guided by the clamor for life with justice and dignity for all.

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