

How I Became A Traitor

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Contents

Part One	3
BENEFITS OF BEING MARGINAL	3
DAMN GRILLE OF INDIFFERENCE	4
Part Two	5
FOUGHT THE CULTURE, WOKE UP IN DIRT	5
PRICE LIST FOR HEROISM	7
Part Three	8
HUNTING UKRAINIAN BOYS	8
THE BRIGHT FLAME OF FORCED MOBILIZATION	10
Part Four	11
LOOK, THE BORDERS OF THE COUNTRY, CULTURE AND PERSONALITY ARE ROTTING	11

Part One

BENEFITS OF BEING MARGINAL

“I was not a human being here. Not a visitor. I was a refugee. A victim. And they didn’t care that I was also a hunter. A real sadist. I was hunting for my robber. But they only saw me in one dimension.” from THE MINING BOYS

I must to admit, in the novel THE MINING BOYS, I embellished some moments. For instance, in the scene where I am beaten by a Ukrainian military while trying to reach the border, I wrote that he was hitting me and simultaneously singing the Ukrainian anthem. In reality, he wasn’t singing but was swearing loudly. The anthem seemed to me a more expressive way to convey the absurdity of what was happening—the character seeks protection but ends up trapped by the very person he sought protection from. Nevertheless, the essence remained unchanged—an unlawful beating, malicious and ugly, perfectly illustrating what Ukraine was like in the early days of the war, while on TV, they spoke of unity.

I allowed such distortions because, in writing the novel, my goal was to create a work of fiction, not a documentary text. In writing this essay, my goal is different—to show reality without embellishments, the reality that is not spoken about.

Why is it not spoken about? Because speaking the truth is unpatriotic. Because, in war, you must support your country, no matter what crimes it commits. Otherwise, you become an eccentric outcast. Because patriarchal society demands that all guys want to fight, or else guys will be deprived of the crucial right to be called guys. Because they’ll beat you and make you apologize publicly in the end.

So why can I say what others can’t? It’s because I’m gay, and Ukrainian society is so homophobic that it mentally aligns much more closely with Russia than with Europe. Having lived 30 years in a homophobic country, I fully experienced what it’s like to be a marginal and an outcast, so such a perspective is not only not frightening but even familiar to me. Moreover, I am guided by the words of Max Stirner, who wrote about the human limit: “I have the right to everything I can get hold of. And I cannot grasp what is beyond my reach.” Since I can write, I will write and turn the word into an elegant revolver with ink bullets.

The state metamorphosis amuses me – for 30 years, society insisted I was abnormal just because I like guys. Now, suddenly, it demands that I defend it. The victim defending the offender is a Slavic trait, especially prevalent in Russian literature. However, as great as that literature may be, this phenomenon is far from common sense. Much of what is happening today in Ukraine and Russia is far from common sense.

Through this text, I want to lift the veil of propaganda through which the world receives information about the Russo-Ukrainian war. Propaganda claims Ukraine is fighting for democracy, yet human rights are being revoked within Ukraine. It says collective responsibility exists, meaning every Russian is guilty of the war, yet it doesn’t apply this principle to itself. Propaganda says killing is normal, that every Ukrainian should know how to kill. I consider any killing just that – killing, and nothing more. Just as I consider any rape – rape, regardless of the context. It’s a curious question: if forced love is called rape, why don’t we call forced defense a crime? Forced mobilization in Ukraine seems to have peaked, but it shows no signs of stopping. That’s what I want to talk about.

You see, this damn marginal is loading the revolver with ink bullets. Politicians come and go; political regimes eventually weaken. The power of a writer resurrects every time someone reads their works. Care to guess whom the writer's revolver is aimed at now?

DAMN GRILLE OF INDIFFERENCE

"Adults cry louder than their children. Children grow up after every loud explosion. Jazz, that's what kept me from going crazy. Yeah, people literally went crazy. Once on the street I saw a couple. The girl kisses the boy, and she cries. The boy laughs, and therefore she kisses not even his lips, kisses his gums. He laughs. Then the doctors push him to the ambulance" from HOLES IN THE SHAPE OF HUMANS

I'm writing this text in Portugal, in the cozy Biblioteca Municipal Almeida Garrett. Due to renovation work, the main entrance of the library is closed, so I had to bypass the building through Parque da Quinta da Macieirinha. To do this, I descended from the hill and ascended on the same hill from the west side on slippery cobblestones. I walked along a stone wall with occasional openings fenced with an iron grille.

Behind one of these grilles stood a guy around 30. In one hand, he held a cigarette, and in the other, a paper cup of coffee. Due to recent rain, it's no wonder I slipped on the cobblestones and fell. I fell right at the feet of this guy. He waved his hands, causing his coffee to spill on the floor. It immediately became clear that, due to the presence of the grille, he couldn't help me in any way. All he could do was watch. I saw how he resigned himself to this. Amazing transformation. I got up, shook myself off, and walked away.

I don't feel like a stranger inside this Portuguese library because, besides the tanned Portuguese, there are many lively Brazilians, energetic Africans, a couple of Russians, a group of Americans with accents straight out of English language audio textbooks, and a funny six-year-old Filipino who accidentally called me "Daddy." One might assume that I would feel just as comfortable throughout Europe. But that's not the case.

Most Europeans – especially guys – often ask me the question: "Why didn't I want to fight for my country?" There's no sympathy in this question. No solidarity. Just curiosity. Just like in the situation with my fall and the iron grille. The same invisible grille appears in every interaction with Europeans. NATO gives them a sense of security. In Portugal, war feels impossible, so communication with a refugee from Ukraine is met with a coldness contrasting with the Portuguese warmth.

In Portugal, I am an eccentric exhibit, someone who gained useless life experience during wartime. The Portuguese are too far from Ukraine to understand that the enemy is not Russia or Ukraine but the system. And even if war feels impossible in Portugal, it doesn't make the country safe from the potential harm the system can inflict. The funniest part of the Portuguese situation is that relatively recently, in historical terms, Portugal had the dictatorship of António de Oliveira Salazar, while neighbouring Spain had the dictatorship of Francisco Franco. But even this doesn't help the locals wake up to see something more significant behind the war in Ukraine, threatening not only Slavs but everyone.

Indifference is the danger of our era. Indifference from satiation. From illusory safety. Whether it's a TV screen, a computer monitor, or the iron grille of a Portuguese library – we are all hostages to the state system. No matter how non-systemic you consider yourself, whether a marginal, an outcast, or anything else, the state still views you as its resource. While a girl

demands not to be objectified by guys in a bar, guys are objectified by the state. Ukraine easily turned its male population into a mobilization reserve. Now, Ukrainian authorities officially state that they will seek the deportation of all guys with Ukrainian citizenship from abroad, forcing them to choose between prison or war. I don't accept such a choice. What would you choose?

It's remarkable how a state threatening its citizens with death also uses the manipulation of revoking citizenship as a lever. I won't waste time discussing how absurd it is to take pride in something bestowed upon you by chance rather than earned by your efforts. I'll just say that losing citizenship of a country that threatens you is not disgraceful; it's an honour and a privilege. It's the same honour as being labelled a foreign agent in Russia in the current realities. In general, any attempt by the state to stigmatize you, viewed from a historical perspective, appears as an honourable award, although in the present moment, it looks like a catastrophe.

Not all Russians are bad. Not all Ukrainians are heroes. There's no reason to trust Russian statistics because even before the war, we knew that statistical institutions in Russia are under the regime's control. Also, it's naive to trust Ukrainian statistics, but for some reason, this is not so obvious to many. Both sides tarnish people, turning yesterday's relative into a target for artillery.

But is a person inherently evil? For example, the initial reaction of the guy behind the iron grille of the library was noble — to help someone who fell. However, because of the presence of the grille, all he actually did was spill coffee on the fallen me. People are inherently more inclined to goodness than to wickedness, but conditions created by the system, such as this grille, turn an average person into a scoundrel. How does this happen? The system provides people with justification. Justification seemingly grants the right to indifference. Indifference leads to inaction. And an individual's inaction allows the system to commit crimes and remain unpunished.

Part Two

FOUGHT THE CULTURE, WOKE UP IN DIRT

"It's impossible to accurately recount the horrors of wartime because when you narrate it, you add a logic that often doesn't exist during war."

from THE MINING BOYS

From books on the craft of writing, I know the plot structure that will be interesting to most people. All you need for this is the juxtaposition of opposites. You need to demonstrate how a character ends up on the side of the one they fought against in the beginning. For example, a concentration camp victim encounters a guard and falls in love with them. Interesting? Indeed, but much more interesting is observing something that is not an individual but an entire country.

At the beginning of the war, Ukraine tried its best to show that Ukrainians and Russians not only are not fraternal peoples but also have nothing in common at all. This led to the cancellation of Russian culture in Ukraine. By cancelling the culture, we legitimized ignorance and now find ourselves akin to Russia not in a love for the novels of Fyodor Dostoevsky but in harsh mobilization measures, the suppression of freedom of speech, and dissent. Despite Friedrich Nietzsche's attacks on morality, Ukrainian military surpassed him in this — in Odessa, soldiers beat a man in front of his tiny child because he refused to take a military draft notice.

Even if Ukraine wins the war, the Ukraine I lived in no longer exists. If at the beginning of the war, Russia claimed that it came to save the Russian-speaking population from discrimination by Ukrainian authorities, it sounded absurd. As a Russian-speaking resident of Ukraine, I'll say that before the war, there was little discrimination, but now it has appeared – the mayor of Kharkiv was fined for giving an interview in Russian.

But now a Russian-speaking Ukrainian cannot claim discrimination on a linguistic basis because, in doing so, he would indirectly confirm Russia's statement and thus take the side of the aggressor. But I don't support Russian aggression. Nevertheless, I say that the Russian language is my native language, not Ukrainian. Even in my Ukrainian passport, my name is written in both Russian and Ukrainian. The fact that the contemporary authorities exclude the Russian language everywhere, considering that half of Ukraine's population is Russian-speaking, is a monstrous violation of rights. And it's not just about minority rights. Even in this, Ukraine is still closer to Russia than to Europe, where such discrimination seems at least inappropriate.

The media depicts Ukraine as a country fighting for democratic values and freedom. However, at the same time, Ukraine has cancelled human rights. War justifies everything. The ban on men leaving the country has been in effect since the first day of the war. Today, a man in Ukraine cannot get a job, go to the hospital, buy or sell real estate without the involvement of the military commissariat. Police and military beat, humiliate, and detain any guy they encounter on their way to forcibly send them to war. Draft notices are often used as a method of punishing citizens for not looking the way they should, speaking the wrong language, or simply not liking a specific representative of authority.

At the beginning of the war, I followed the events not through news sites but through videos on TikTok, where ordinary people posted videos of shelling and explosions. TikTok app turned to the territory of free news but it has ended by now. Anyway, it was obvious who the enemy was. Pretty soon these videos were mixed with recordings of different kinds of crimes – military personnel forcibly taking young men right off the streets. Try entering keywords like “мобилизация Украине”, “Украина повестки”, “Украина призыв” in the TikTok search field, and you'll witness the scale of how Ukraine destroys, intimidates, and humiliates its own citizens. But these videos are quickly deleted. Similar videos can be found on Russian TikTok with one difference – in Russia, mobilization happens periodically, while in Ukraine, it has been continuous for a year and a half.

The top leadership of Ukraine declares its readiness to continue the war at any cost and intends to achieve victory no matter what. But what is the price of such a victory? The price is me. My life. The lives of my friends. If the state has decided it's ready to pay such a price, it doesn't mean I've made the same decision. The cunning of the system is that it merges with the citizen when it's convenient, under the guise of patriotism, and separates itself the rest of the time.

Yes, the cancellation of Russian culture in Ukraine succeeded. Today, it's easier to buy a collection of poems by Joseph Brodsky in Lisbon than in Kyiv, but who became poorer because of it? Now Russia and Ukraine are united by cruelty justified by the desire to seize or reclaim territory, expand borders, or simply maintain existence, at the cost of young men from poor families who don't have \$10,000 to buy a pass for their son to leave the country.

Regardless of the motives, a crime should remain a crime. If people in Russia are silent out of fear, in Ukraine, they are silent due to a logical trap set by propaganda. If you defend Russian culture and the native language, it means you justify the aggressor. It's uncompromising and effective.

But why attack culture at all? O-o-oh, that's beneficial to both sides. A reflective person won't just pull the trigger so easily.

"I don't want to die because of
two or three kings whom
I've never even looked in the eyes."
by Joseph Brodsky

Culture will make people doubt the expediency of aggression. Culture knows how to show that the world is not divided into black and white, into strangers and our own, that the world is much more complex. Therefore, even if Ukraine wins the war, the Ukraine I lived in no longer exists, and there is no going back. My goal is not to allow them to do the same with culture.

PRICE LIST FOR HEROISM

"Amazing feeling. Once I read a story about how a hand rebelled against its owner. I would not have believed that I would find myself in a similar situation with the language, and yet I ended up..."

from HOLES IN THE SHAPE OF HUMANS

Ukraine actively breeds heroes. Firstly, by declaring the entire Ukrainian nation as a nation of heroes. Then, by singling out heroes individually among the military and politicians. Following literary cleverness, I would assume that each such hero has an increased chance of becoming the opposite of what we are used to considering a hero.

Heroization is the sealing of a person at the moment of the highest manifestation of nobility. It's the peak. After the peak, there will inevitably be a descent; the Portuguese hills leave me no doubt about that. Yesterday the media wrote "Glory to the Ukrainian army," and today I see an article with the text: "In Kryvyi Rih town, a group of veterans of the Armed Forces of Ukraine beat participants of a bike ride, accusing the young people of not going to defend their homeland."

On the Internet, it is easy to find information from sociological studies that tell, through examples, how embittered people return from war, how strongly traumatic events of this kind affect the psyche. These people need special treatment, but having lived in Ukraine all my life, I'm more than sure that the state will not be able to organize this special treatment. The war has not yet ended, and I already see such news – in Zaporizhia city, a military man was not allowed into a cafe because he was in military uniform. Not receiving due respect and care but faced with indifference and injustice of the capitalist world, a former soldier will undoubtedly begin to seek an outlet in the antisocial dimension. Being a marginal, a rebel, a Russian-speaking author in a Ukrainian-centric dictatorship, a gay man in a patriarchal society, some manifestations of the antisocial dimension are well known to me, but in my case, it does not involve violence.

In the case of participants in military actions, violence is unlikely to remain only on the battlefield because sometimes even a school teacher finds it hard to leave thoughts about work in the classroom, let alone a soldier. Aggression, intolerance, PTSD. Professional deformation is a phenomenon that is not so easy to get rid of. Therefore, I am not surprised by news like this – in Kyiv, a court fined a soldier who beat a designer near a club due to homophobia. He was fined \$45.

If \$45 is the price set by the state for beating, then in Ukraine, you can easily open a business where, at a fixed price, you can buy boys for beating. Voiceless and silent boys. Powerless, and therefore unprotected.

One day the war will end. The heroes will return home. The poor country will become even poorer. I remind you that the minimum wage in Ukraine is only \$212, and the pension is \$70. The cost of a single beating is \$45. The Apple Pencil, with which I take notes for my texts, costs as much as 2 Ukrainian pensions or 3 beatings. Will you place an order, sir?

Part Three

HUNTING UKRAINIAN BOYS

“Humanism is the defence of every individual. Fascism is an attempt to ‘protect’ a nation.”

from THE MINING BOYS

I find my own inconsistency surprising: I was just a nice guy, and now suddenly I’m part of the mobilization reserve. If at the beginning of the war there were indeed many volunteers, then after a couple of months, their numbers sharply decreased. New soldiers had to be forcibly taken from the streets. What an exciting game it is to run away from the military, who are supposed to protect you, and at night hear explosions from Russian missiles falling on our cities, allegedly for the sake of defense. Even a torn condom in an acid club is not as dangerous as the defense of Ukraine and Russia, the scars of which will be visible even from under the lid of my coffin.

On the first day of the war, my partner and I naively set off for Lviv to cross the border there. Only on the road, which took 33 hours instead of 6, did we learn that the president had signed a decree banning guys from leaving the country. Still, we decided to try to leave the country because this ban sounded so absurd that it seemed implausible. War. Closed borders. Ukrainian-speaking soldiers look at my passport, and seeing that I am from the eastern part of the country, immediately treat me with suspicion, as if I am a traitor and the cause of the war.

My hometown was occupied in the first days of the conflict. It is still occupied. My relatives called me and told me to go to them for salvation, not to Lviv. I thought they had gone mad from active shelling, staying in the basement, yes, in Ukraine, basements are called shelters, and even after a year and a half of war, real shelters are equipped in few places. This once again demonstrates that Ukraine is saving its borders, but not its citizens.

It turned out that when Ukraine closed all borders for guys, the Russian borders remained open. Therefore, it was possible to leave the occupied territories for Russia through Crimea, and from Russia to Georgia or Turkey, and from there to Europe. By the time I understood this scheme, it was already too late – we found ourselves in the Ukrainian-speaking Lviv, where everything Russian was despised, even us, because we speak Ukrainian with an accent.

For two and a half months, we lived in an office on the floor. We slept under the table in the conference room with glass walls. What could be more absurd than trying to hide for two and a half months in a room with transparent walls? I describe this period in the novel “THE MINING BOYS.”

From time to time, employees came to the office. I tried to keep communication to a minimum to avoid trouble. I didn’t trust anyone, especially those trying to gain trust. For two and a half

months, we bathed in a bucket for floor cleaning and wiped ourselves with napkins. Two-and-a-half-damn-months! All because we were hiding in our own country from the Russian army and Ukrainian soldiers, while trying to contain a bout of paranoia. However, paranoia still doesn't let me rest today.

An incredible situation unfolded with housing in western Ukraine, which is now showcased as an example for every true Ukrainian to follow. While many Europeans were letting Ukrainians into their homes for free, in Lviv, rental prices equaled those in Paris. The free shelters organized by the city authorities were scrutinized by the military, who took guys from there and sent them to their deaths. It was such a cheerful time.

Soon it became apparent that in Lviv, the police and the military were hunting boys on the streets. However, they targeted those who had come to Lviv from other regions. They particularly disliked Russian speakers because, in their opinion, the war started because of them. That's what one of the guys who came to the office told me. I was afraid that any of the employees would report us to the cops just because they didn't like my accent or my orientation. Recently, I watched a movie about how during World War II, a group of Jews spent several months in the Lviv sewer system, hiding from the Nazis. Were we any different from them? And the TV still talked about universal unity and imminent victory.

In some stores, they refused to serve me because of the language. I spent these 2 and a half months in previously unknown stress. This situation reached its peak on May 9. On this day, our countries celebrate the end of World War II. There were rumors that on this day, Russia would drop an atomic bomb on Kyiv. We were so tired of the tension in western Ukraine that on May 9, under the threat of atomic war, we went to its epicenter just to stop hearing the Ukrainian language, accusations of having an accent, blame for the start of the war, and so on.

What I wrote above is unacceptable in the conditions of a non-free but proud Ukraine. Official media talk about unity, the absence of language problems, and I feel like a Jew hiding in the sewers. I am Anne Frank. The insane pianist. And only by a miracle did I not end my own life.

Meanwhile, while Ukraine's official rhetoric constructs a positive image of a country fighting for freedom, frozen in a half-step away from victory over a decaying empire, the nation is actually witnessing the festering growth of discriminatory practices, the impunity of authoritative structures, and the powerlessness of ordinary people. In such a period, writers should stand on the side of common sense. But what is happening in reality?

This is what's happening: Ukraine's most popular writer, Serhiy Zhadan, releases a music video in which two girls kiss for a couple of seconds. Part of the video is set in a church. Ukrainian society is outraged that lesbians are kissing in the same video where a church is shown. The priest who allowed the shooting is suspended from service in the church. The writer himself says nothing substantial on the matter and obediently removes the video from YouTube. In an interview, he only talks about how Russian-speaking writers in Ukraine are currently inappropriate. And they were inappropriate before. No struggle. No coverage of relevant issues. Only speeches consonant with the official rhetoric: Russia is the aggressor empire, and Ukraine is the heroic victim. But is this a struggle? A writer is made great by the words he writes; the same time not only an unfortunate word, but also something unspoken at the right time can make him miserable.

I don't believe in Ukraine's victory because at the moment, the interests of the Russian-speaking population, which is not a minority, are being suppressed. Just as the interests of the Ukrainian-speaking population were suppressed before. I don't believe because Ukrainian soldiers have to buy their own uniforms, while corruption scandals erupt at the highest levels. I

don't believe because I see few differences between Ukrainian propaganda and Russian propaganda. Both are aimed at deceiving, substituting concepts, and suppressing freedoms.

The state is concerned only with survival at any cost. The state justifies it by any means necessary. As usual, it's the ordinary people who suffer. But now their mouths are shut because expressing an opposing view to the official one is unpatriotic. In Odessa, a man was forcefully taken by the military and driven to the draft board. Later, the regional draft board admitted the excessive emotionality of their employees. That's what they called it—excessive emotionality! You can't object or speak out against it. It's unpatriotic. This is the very case where I'm glad to be faggot—it gives me freedom.

THE BRIGHT FLAME OF FORCED MOBILIZATION

“What's the point of politeness when they politely request nonsense?”

from THE MINING BOYS

To give one's life for someone is a noble impulse. But if someone, in an office tone, prepares a plan for you on how you must give your life, it is a crime, and the owner of that office tone is a criminal. Somehow, not them but I became the criminal.

On TV, they scare me with the idea that they will take away my citizenship. On social media, they show videos of frightened guys apologizing on camera for daring to say something that contradicts the official rhetoric. Prison or war — I'm disgusted that I even have to make such a choice. Fortunately, Friedrich Nietzsche taught me to choose a third option from two. So here I am to tell you a story you won't want to believe.

I realize that, on the one hand, they say Ukrainians are a nation of heroes. On the other hand, they declare that all Russians are bad, as they cannot get rid of their regime. The cancellation of Russian culture and the emergence of reactionary Ukrainian culture. Support for Ukraine by the American Congress. Support by European countries. However, the culture and politics of one country are often opposites. What Russian writers have skillfully and sharply written about Russia, criticizing it, no Ukrainian writer has managed.

The rejection of culture in Ukraine happened easily, indicating that culture was not essential for most Ukrainians. The reason is Maslow's pyramid, and the fact that a Ukrainian, receiving his \$212, is forced to think about survival rather than the problems described in the books of Fyodor Dostoevsky or Leonid Andreyev. Well, without culture, there is no human dignity, no values worth defending. Without culture, there are no meanings to uphold. Without culture, a person can be easily pushed towards war. It's easy to say who the enemy is and who the friend is. It's easy to divide the country based on language. It's easy to fuel internal conflicts and manage divided and weakened groups.

I feel disgusted that war has interfered with my creativity. I would assign a higher value to any erotic scene than to war, because war comes from death, while the most depraved erotic scene comes from love. But at the same time, I cannot refrain from writing. I cannot, because if I don't become someone who voices his opposition, the crimes will continue to multiply. In Europe, I received protection as a refugee, seeking refuge from Russian aggression, but few realize that I am equally seeking refuge here from Ukraine.

Anarchists surrounded me throughout my life. It happened because of my love for rock music and alternative literature, due to my interest in counterculture in general. I don't consider myself

an anarchist, but many principles of anarchism are close to me, as some religious principles are close to me, without making me a religious person. All of this falls into the realm of art, literature. I construct a territory of freedom in my books, and I don't care how this freedom will be called later.

But for someone who has been associated with anarchists for a long time, I behaved foolishly. I allowed myself to forget that the state is an exploiter, and a person in it is expendable. If I hadn't forgotten this, I would hardly have been surprised that Ukraine reclassified me from a human to a mobilization reserve.

At the beginning of the war, I expected my state to protect me, but it made a demand – give yourself to the war in my honor. Fill your pale body with bullets. Learn our slogans and forget your principles. All the time I spent in military Ukraine, for women and children, there was only one enemy – Russian missiles. For me, there were two enemies – Russian rockets and Ukrainian police who want to send me closer to the Russian missiles. In my own country, I, like many guys, was trapped. I couldn't leave a place where staying was dangerous. Why forced mobilization did not remain a shameful fact of the past, like burning women at the stake for suspicion of witchcraft, is beyond my understanding.

Part Four

LOOK, THE BORDERS OF THE COUNTRY, CULTURE AND PERSONALITY ARE ROTTING

“Homeless. Grenade. Should i kill them out of pity for them, or pity them to remain indifferent to them... I don't like the way I think about it at all. And I think about it because of the war. I'm afraid to imagine what those who return from the front will think about.”

from HOLES IN THE SHAPE OF HUMANS

On the Internet, you can find many discussions about borders and where they should actually be drawn. Should Eastern Ukraine go to Russia, and Lviv to Poland? Hungary could also claim some territories, including Uzhhorod, where, along with Russian, even Hungarian was abolished, considering that there is a large population of ethnic Hungarians. Accusing Ukraine of Nazism, for many Ukrainians, means siding with Russia, but doesn't Ukraine itself show its negative side by suppressing ethnicities living on its territory?

As for borders and where they should be drawn, I have one solution. Occam's razor, which will cut off all the unnecessary. My solution to the border issue is this: war unites people, but the acceptance of historical shame will create a real border for any country. For example, Ukrainian rhetoric contains the idea of collective responsibility. That is, according to the average Ukrainian, every Russian is guilty of the war. But let's try to apply the principle of collective responsibility to Ukraine. It's no secret that Polish people are concerned about the events of the Volhynian massacre. If collective responsibility exists, then every Ukrainian should acknowledge that they themselves are guilty of the Volhynian massacre, just as every Russian is guilty of the war. Where people stop acknowledging this guilt is where the real border of Ukraine will be, as the Volhynian massacre was committed by real Ukrainians, whom Ukrainian propaganda now sets as an example for residents of eastern Ukraine.

The question of borders doesn't particularly bother me, just like the question of nationality. On the gravestone of the Russian poet Velimir Khlebnikov, it is written – Chairman of the Earth. A mocking title, but there is more rationality in it than it seems at first glance. Being abroad, I don't feel any particular discomfort because the cultural space today is shared. I still read Dostoevsky and Thomas Mann, the Marquis de Sade and Kōbō Abe. Russian literature is still sold in bookstores across Europe just because it has made a significant contribution to world culture. Ultimately, it is world culture that occupies me. I write not for Ukrainian or Russian readers, but for a global audience. Works of art, be it a painting, a book, or a film, are created at too high a cost to give up on it for political reasons. Well, propaganda in art has existed before, and it's not so difficult to detect and dismiss it.

Over the past year and a half, I have written a novel titled *THE MINING BOYS* and a collection of stories called *HOLES IN THE SHAPE OF HUMANS*. Both the first and the second book tell a story of struggle, hatred, sex, freedom, and submission. They delve into the realm of fabricated crimes, depicting a narrative where an entire country becomes what it fights against.

To be honest, I look at the events unfolding quite pessimistically because everything happening in both Russia and Ukraine seems to be driven by distorted pretexts of propaganda rather than the pursuit of peace and justice. In Europe, I observe a sea of cynical curiosity.

“Why didn't you go to fight?”

“Would you go?”

The very framing of this question seems monstrous to me, as essentially, I am being asked why I didn't want to die. One day, I decided to find statistics to confront the audacity of such questions.

What percentage of soldiers die during active combat? I posed this question to ChatGPT. The artificial intelligence responded: “It is impossible to provide a definitive percentage, as it depends on numerous factors.” I then clarified that I was interested in the death statistics in the war between Russia and Ukraine. The response I received was: “As of the end of my data in January 2022, Ukraine is not in active war, and I cannot provide up-to-date statistics.”

It turns out that the ChatGPT knowledge base is unaware of the war in Ukraine. Like a deceived parent unaware of what happens to their child when skipping school, ChatGPT thinks everything is fine with Ukraine—no attacks, no deaths, nothing happened. And I don't exist until I speak. Until my story is published. And if there is no reaction, it means crimes can be multiplied. And they are multiplying. Meanwhile, the world stands in line for a morning latte with coconut milk, oblivious to it all.

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