

Abandonment and obliteration

The abandonment by the Allies and the subsequent erasure of a nation and its culture by an occupying power - this is the greatest collective trauma of the Poles, going even deeper than the history of the Second World War. And also the very core of Polish sensitivity to the world.

To understand Polish sensitivity to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, one needs to look back at the relatively recent history of Central and Eastern Europe. Reborn after the First World War, Poland had been independent for little more than twenty years when it was invaded by the Germans and Russians in 1939. In the years that followed, both occupying powers made a bloody attempt to destroy the Polish national elite and erase Polish culture and national identity. Notably, before the invasion began, Poland had strong alliances with and military guarantees from the democratic powers: France and Great Britain. But these alliances and guarantees turned out to be purely formal. Paris and London made an explicit declaration of being on Poland's side, but they did not lift a finger to help their invaded ally. And when in the fifth year of occupation, a Polish uprising broke out in Warsaw, the Western Allies – by then joined by America – debated and argued about how to support the insurgents until the uprising collapsed and the Polish capital was destroyed.

When the Russians invaded Ukraine in 2022, the revived Ukrainian state was only a few years older than reborn Poland was in 1939. In both cases, the political aim of the invasion was to destroy a state that was only just beginning to stand on its own feet after years of captivity. It was then, and is now, all about undermining the state's right to political existence before it can build and strengthen itself anew. Celebrating Poland's demise at the outbreak of the Second World War, the attackers referred to Poland as a "bastard child of the Treaty of Versailles" to challenge the right of the Polish state to exist on the map of Europe. In February 2022, during a televised Kremlin ceremony, the ruler of Russia declared Ukraine to be a crazy invention of the Bolsheviks, telling Russians, and the whole world, that there had never really been such a thing as Ukraine or the Ukrainian people. After a year of war, we know with absolute clarity that the invasion of Ukraine was part of a larger plan: the destruction of the Ukrainian patriotic elite and the obliteration of Ukrainian culture. For in Moscow, Ukraine is viewed as a Russian province that, for some unfathomable reason, is resisting its 'natural' Russian destiny.

In one respect, Ukraine is in a much better position than Poland was in 1939. Although it had not managed to gain any firm alliances or military guarantees before the invasion, Kyiv was not left alone at a critical moment in its history. It was given more than just diplomatic – or merely verbal – support from the free world: it received weapons. Albeit with great reluctance as both Europe and America took a long time to decide whether proper military aid to the invaded country was worthwhile. After a long hesitation, America and Europe decided that, like it or not, they had to risk sending in heavy weapons. Then it turned out that once you started sending arms, it became impossible not to send more modern and better ones over time. For it is harder and harder to come to terms with the fact that those we have given a chance to defend themselves cannot repel the attackers. They are bleeding themselves to death because we have helped too little, too carefully and too late.

The Polish reaction to the invasion was different in that the moment of hesitation was brief. It lasted only a few dozen hours after 24 February, during which the whole Europe was dumbfounded, not quite able to comprehend that the Russian army was really trying to take the

capital of a neighbouring country by military force and kill its leader. In some European capitals, especially in Berlin, Vienna and Budapest, the ‘moment’ continues to this day. Yet it has now been a year since the start of the invasion, and the over 40-million-strong Ukrainian nation shows no inclination to surrender or in any other way trade away their independence. For us in Poland, it was different from the beginning – the first images of Ukrainians coming to the heroic defence of bombarded Kyiv brought back the memories of our fathers and grandfathers fighting in Warsaw in 1939 and 1944. And there is no stronger collective emotion in Poland than the one born of the loneliness and abandonment by the free world that we experienced in our time of need. The abandonment that resulted in the collapse of the state and an attempt to erase Polish culture and national identity.

And let’s not forget that we were by no means fast friends with Ukraine before the invasion. The shared history which united us in a common state before the 18th century later led to fierce enmity (as is often the case in such circumstances). It was particularly evident during the flourishing of European nationalisms in the 20th century. The long-lasting resentment over past injustices and crimes persisted even after both nations freed themselves from Russian domination during the famous revolutions of 1989. The governments of free Poland and free Ukraine tried prudently to overcome this age-old animosity. But the truth is that before 2022, this had only been achieved in some places and to a limited extent. What happened in Poland and Ukraine after 24 February, however, was a collective and widespread shock for both peoples, a true historical catharsis, changing the course of Central and Eastern Europe.

In Poland, without much debate or doubt, we quickly decided that we must not allow Ukraine to share our fate from almost a century ago. More than that, preventing this from happening became part of our Polish mission in the modern free world. And this was no political decision of the government but a nationwide fact that the Polish authorities quickly recognised and from which they drew the right conclusions. It was no coincidence that the February wave of Ukrainian refugees inspired a collective mood of enthusiasm in Poles, similar to that of a host welcoming their best guest in their home. Nor was it a surprise that Poland offered its air force to help rescue Ukraine already in February, even though the Americans blocked this initiative.

On the Ukrainian side, there was a moment of collective enlightenment. In a matter of days, the entire nation, which suddenly found itself under the bombs and rockets, realised it had a neighbour across its western border who regarded Ukraine’s freedom as its national cause. It came as a shock to the Ukrainians, and within a few weeks, it annihilated their long-standing distrust of the Poles.

Therefore, let us repeat: the abandonment by the allies and the subsequent obliteration of a nation and its culture by occupying powers is the Poles’ greatest collective trauma, reaching even deeper than the events of the Second World War. It is also the very core of Polish sensitivity to the world. ‘Polish poetry alone shall never betray, never defame thee, Soldier,’ Stefan Żeromski, a writer and a moralist, once wrote. This romantic-sounding verse carried the shadow of the distinctive Polish disappointment with the attitude of the free world that always rationalises its fear of supposedly too great and too risky involvement in helping the attacked. Were it not for the Polish experience of abandonment and obliteration, we would probably look at Ukraine’s current situation much the same way as the Germans or the French do: with admiration for the nation’s courage and disgust for the brutality of the invader but also with a strong doubt lurking in the back of our minds as to whether, at some point, it might not be better

to leave Ukrainians to their fate because the risk in defending them from an invading nuclear power might seem too great. So if anyone in Europe or America wants to really understand the Polish attitude towards this war, they must comprehend the reason why such a doubt never lurks in the back of a Polish mind. And until Ukraine is successfully defended, it never will.

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