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GUEST ESSAY

Ukraine Is the Next Act in Putin's Empire of Humiliation

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By Peter Pomerantsev

Mr. Pomerantsev is the author of "This Is Not Propaganda: Adventures in the War Against Reality."

Valentyna told me that not long after Russian troops arrived in Yahidne, her village in northern Ukraine, a tall, blond soldier came to use her bathroom. She asked him what the Russians were doing in Ukraine. "We want you to be with us," he told her, "for you to be with Russia."

In Yahidne, the reality of being "with us" meant the following: The Russian soldiers herded some 300 villagers into a cellar underneath a school next to their artillery, turning them into human shields. The oldest villager was 96. "We are here to protect you," the Russian soldiers told them. But they held the villagers in the cellar for about a month, and 10 died after Russians did not provide proper medical care. Others, including Valentyna, a pensioner who lives alone, stayed in their homes, which Russian soldiers ransacked, looking for money and loot.

I went to Yahidne in mid-April, not long after it had been liberated by Ukrainian troops. The village is not an unusual example of the brutality that Russia tries to sell as brotherhood in Ukraine. Throughout the war, being "with us" has been synonymous with atrocity: the mass bombings of schools, homes and hospitals, and the rape and execution of civilians.

It's also been synonymous with humiliation.

To humiliate people is to exploit your power over them, making them feel worthless and dependent on you. It is clear, then, that the Russian military seems intent on humiliating Ukrainians, taking away their right to independence and their right to make their own decisions. This war is an act of imperialism, a colonial war meant to destroy another nation's right to exist and to subjugate it. But it is not empire building in the sense of a coldly considered plan for territorial gain and economic resources; it is the next act of Vladimir Putin's empire of humiliation.

Russia's president would have the world believe that his country is guided by unifying ideas of cultural pride and conservative values, exceptionalism and splendid isolation. But in reality, Mr. Putin's Russia has no coherent ideology; it's just a mess of contradictions: It is Soviet nostalgia and a cultural arrogance that glorifies the Russian empire; it is a Russian ethnic and Christian Orthodox superiority that sits uncomfortably with what is supposed to be pride in being a patchwork of ethnicities and faiths.

Russia is a bastion of conservative values that has some of the world's highest rates of divorce, and its soundtrack is a Kremlin TV that amplifies any compliment or conciliatory gesture from the West — clips of Tucker Carlson, the Fox News host, appear frequently. Kremlin propaganda claims Russia revels in isolationism, but it is also addicted to seeking approval from abroad.

And Mr. Putin's success as president of Russia has rested for some time on his ability to mete out daily humiliations to Russians and then act as if he feels their rage as they do, as if he alone knows where to direct it — toward the West, toward Ukraine, anywhere except toward the Kremlin.

But when Mr. Putin himself tries to explain why Russia is in Ukraine, he swings between what seem like very different excuses. In a speech in June Mr. Putin compared himself to Peter the Great, on a mission to expand Russian lands. Another time he claimed “we had no choice” but to act in Ukraine, a message that was repeated endlessly on television.

So which is it? It is neither and both. Mr. Putin likes to perform both sides of the humiliation drama: from the seething resentment of the put-upon Russian everyman to cosplaying Peter the Great. This allows him to appeal to Russians' deep-seated sense of humiliation, which the Kremlin itself inflicts on people, and then compensate for it. It's a performance that taps into the cycle of humiliation and aggression that defines the experience of life in Russia, and now Ukraine is the stage.

When Russia pulled back from western Ukraine in May to regroup and launch its second phase in the east, it had lost more than 10,000 troops and enormous amounts of matériel. It was clear to almost everyone that it had suffered a major defeat.

In the weeks since, Mr. Putin and his generals have seemed quite content to continue to send troops to the front lines as cannon fodder. The Kremlin has not announced a national draft, which would likely be unpopular, but there have been initiatives to encourage people to enlist. The high death toll among ethnic minority soldiers suggests that they fill the front ranks in disproportionate numbers.

Mr. Putin, in his speeches, often employs the language of “family,” with Russia as the elder brother to other countries. It’s a rhetorical tool Mr. Putin uses when talking about Ukraine, too. Ukraine is the prodigal relative that must return to the family, that must once more be “with us.”

And there are many other members of this large and complicated family. According to the villagers I spoke to in Yahidne, there were both ethnic Russians and ethnic Tuvans there. Valentyna says that it was drunk, hungry Tuvans who ransacked her house and ripped up the paintings on her walls. Locals remember how ethnic Russians would claim they were there to “protect” the Ukrainians from Asian minority soldiers, even though they were all part of one army. (This racist framing shouldn’t be confused with actual investigations into who was responsible for abuses against civilians.)

Tuvans are an Asian minority from the poorest region of Russia. They were a Buddhist, nomad people. The Soviet regime gained control over the region during the 1920s and 1930s, before incorporating it in 1944. The Soviets forced the nomads to live in collective farms, give up their Buddhist beliefs and traditions and change how they ate and dressed. Resistance was crushed: Eight percent of Tuvans suffered from political repressions, such as imprisonment, execution and exile. These days, the Tuvan community has chronic levels of alcoholism and broken families: More than 68 percent of children are born out of wedlock.

The Tuvans are not the only colonized people whom Russia uses in Ukraine. Chechens, an ethnic minority from the Caucasus, are used by the Russian army for sudden assaults and to frighten civilians — Chechen shock troops have become infamous in Ukraine for posting videos online of themselves as they advance on and occupy new towns. Of course, they also know what it is like to be on the receiving end of an attack from Russia: When Chechens sought independence in the 1990s and early 2000s, their cities and villages were carpet-bombed by President Boris Yeltsin and then Mr. Putin.

In the “family,” ethnic Russians are known as “the elder brother,” but that doesn’t mean they are spared humiliation. Whether it’s the bureaucrats and cops who threaten and bribe citizens and businesses, the farce of participating in fixed elections or the cloying fear that you might be arrested if you dare to speak up against the Kremlin — or if some bureaucrat just wants your business — living in Mr. Putin’s Russia means enduring the daily humiliation of being governed by an extractive class that takes money and lives from its own people.

In this system, even tycoons must live with the uncertainty that someone closer to Mr. Putin than them could take away all their wealth tomorrow. The culture of humiliation goes deep into society. Sexual harassment is routine. A 2017 law decriminalized some domestic abuse against children and women. Extreme hazing has been rife in the army.

The father figure in this family is, of course, authoritarian. Over three-quarters of Russians believe that they need a “strong hand” to rule the country, a common phrase that denotes a leader who will both protect and violently discipline its people, and which Kremlin propaganda often uses to describe Mr. Putin.

In describing Ukraine, Mr. Putin often uses the same discourse. He invokes Russian clichés that deify Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine, as the “mother of all Russian cities” and then turns on this idealized “mother” when “she” doesn’t do what he wants. Just weeks before the invasion, during a news conference with President Emmanuel Macron of France, Mr. Putin said Ukraine should just do “her duty — my beauty” and “put up with it,” a line that was widely viewed as a reference to lyrics about rape.

Maybe the description of the Russian Empire as a family is apt, actually. A family that is deeply unhappy and abusive, in which traumas are layered on top of traumas and some members are singled out for more suffering, some for less, but everyone suffers; those who feel unable to leave don’t want anybody to escape.

After the 2014 Russian-backed uprising in eastern Ukraine, the Kremlin turned the separatist areas of Donetsk and Luhansk into a Soviet Dismaland, with Soviet-style youth groups, propaganda parades with Soviet flags and marches of captured Ukrainian troops through the streets. This time in Ukraine, Russia repeats Soviet mass deportations, detentions and enforced disappearances of intellectuals and activists who support Ukrainian sovereignty. Humiliated people can struggle to imagine a future as they play out old traumas over and over. We won’t let you emerge into a future, the Kremlin seems to be saying to Ukrainians; we want you stuck in the past we can’t overcome.

Kremlin propaganda successfully sublimates the sense of humiliation onto the West. According to Denis Volkov, the director of the polling firm Levada Center since 2014, Russians have claimed that if it wasn’t for Ukraine, the West would have found another excuse to humiliate Russia through sanctions and other measures. Levada’s most recent research suggests that 75 percent of Russians support the war. That support, though, is more of a case of a people so crushed by the state they follow along with anything it tells them to, argues the sociologist Lev Gudkov. More objective statistics are TV ratings for political talk shows. The highest ratings go to shows such as “Sunday Evening With Vladimir Solovyov” and “60 Minutes,” where hosts and guests often call for the annihilation of Ukrainian independence.

Why is that?

In his exploration of humiliation, the contemporary English psychoanalyst Adam Phillips writes in the London Review of Books that, for the psychic survival of the humiliated, it’s necessary for them to “humiliate others, to make others experience what they have suffered”

and “to transform the trauma of vulnerability into the triumph of omnipotent control.” The perpetrator enjoys his sadism; the victim, in order to deal with the humiliation, might learn to enjoy that too and become a masochist, before becoming sadistic to others.

Mr. Putin’s manipulation of the cycle of humiliation and aggression is integral to his psychological grip over Russia. That manipulation can look like legislating to criminalize opposition to the war while also appealing for solidarity in the fight against the West. As the impact of economic sanctions rolls across Russia, Kremlin propaganda has called for Russians to show how tough they are: Haven’t they survived great trials in the past? These calls for toughness can resonate — people can learn to define themselves through surviving pain to the point of getting a certain satisfaction from it.

The Kremlin, of course, avoids any suggestion that it is the source of any pain, now or in the past. There are no major public memorials in Russia, in the shape of museums or movies, statues or open archives, that stand as a record of how the Soviet Union sadistically slaughtered its citizens in the gulags and colonized and repressed other territories and peoples — some school textbooks in Russia celebrate Stalin as an “effective manager.”

Certainly, Russia is not the only country with a history of colonialism and internal repression. But in other countries these histories are usually part of an active debate. In Russia there seems to be nothing in the mainstream discourse that tries to make sense of the past, take responsibility for it or imagine a different path forward.

For Russia to have a chance to come to terms with itself, it will be necessary to confront this history and bring it into the public consciousness — via TV shows or public memorials and educational projects. But admitting one’s own role in this cycle of humiliation and aggression is stymied by the very culture of humiliation: The humiliated feel they have no agency, so why should they feel responsible?

Meanwhile, the threat Russia poses — to Ukraine and to the world — must be mitigated now.

Mr. Putin recently declared that there are only two types of countries: “Either a country is sovereign, or it is a colony,” he said. This is the logic of internal humiliation projected onto geopolitics. For those who are chronically humiliated and humiliate others in turn, the idea that countries large and small alike could have rights is impossible: The world is split into those who dominate and those who are dominated.

Mr. Putin is not just trying to break Ukraine, he is using energy dependency to get Europeans to kneel to Russia’s demands and up until recently was holding more than 22 million tons of grain that the world needs hostage in Ukrainian ports.

In the face of such threats, it can be tempting to try and placate Russia. The editorial board of The New York Times has said that Ukraine will likely have to accept territorial compromises. Mr. Macron has said that the West should avoid humiliating Russia. Such proposals are fundamentally misguided: Russia's sense of humiliation is internal, not imposed upon it. To coddle the Putin regime is merely to participate in the cycle. If you yearn for sustainable security and freedom, abusive partners and predators cannot be indulged. The only option is to limit the sources of dependency.

For Ukraine, that means defending its sovereignty on the battlefield and, when negotiations come, making sure it is in a position of strength. The United States and other allies must keep arming Ukraine to do this. To stop doing so or to let up the pace is just an invitation for more violence and abuse.

For Europe it means breaking free of energy dependence. Though this may be expensive in the short term, in the longer term it will mean true economic security.

For the rest of the world, it means ensuring that we are no longer quite so reliant on Russian food supplies, and that Ukraine is able to export its own grains and fertilizers again. The deal the two countries agreed on for Ukraine to resume grain exports is a welcome development, but it demonstrated the frailty of the world's dependence on Russia's good will, especially after Russian missile strikes hit the southern port of Odesa a day after the agreement was struck.

Residual dependency is to always be vulnerable to Russia's cycle of humiliation and aggression. "We want you to be with us," the Russian soldier told Valentyna. But we know what "with us" really means.

Peter Pomerantsev (@peterpomerantsev) is the author of "This Is Not Propaganda: Adventures in the War Against Reality." He is a senior fellow at Johns Hopkins University's SNF Agora Institute.

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