

Zacharias Mbizo:
The Ukrainian Apocalypse
Literary Miniatures



The atrocious killings in Ukraine are among the things that are usually said to leave us "speechless". On the other hand, the monstrous nature of the crimes committed there requires that we do not remain silent about them. So these literary miniatures are an attempt to speak about the unspeakable in spite of everything.

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Cover picture: George Frederic Watts (1817 – 1904): *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: The Rider on the Pale Horse*; ca. 1878); Walker Art Gallery (Wikimedia Commons)

Death rains from the sky, every night feels like Russian roulette, life resembles a permanent volcanic eruption: Anyone experiencing the war in Ukraine must feel as if they have stepped into St. John's Revelation.



Witnessing the Apocalypse

Sometimes you sit down on one of the piles of rubble in the alley of ruins that used to be an alley of houses and look at the pile of rubble that used to be your church.

Your gaze searches for nothing, it asks for nothing. And yet, very quietly, perhaps unconsciously, the hope stirs within you that a secret power could flow to you from the place where your church once stood – something that could show you a way out of this

spiritual stone desert, a beyond, however hazy, where life follows completely different laws.

Shouldn't something of the divine spirit have penetrated the stones that were once the house of God? But no matter how fervently your eyes pierce the charred ashlar, they remain a lifeless mass that is only filled with life in your memory. It is just like with any other grave – life is only outside it, inside eternal silence prevails.

Although your eyes are wide open, you have the feeling of wandering through a dreamscape. In your mind's eye, you see yourself stepping through a tall, darkly shining gate. You know that this is the entrance to a mysterious book and that you are suddenly a part of it.

Black angels circle in the sky above you. In their hands they carry bowls moulded as if from the deepest darkness of night. Their shape can only be recognised because they are surrounded by a bright halo, as in a solar eclipse.

All these bowls are filled with a mass that is a thousand times darker than the darkest night, but at the same time hotter than the hottest star. This mass is poured out by the black angels into the sky and across the land.

At the same moment, you feel a tremendous tremor in the air. The atmosphere seems to ignite all by itself. Burning clouds gather in the sky and spew their shower of sparks onto the earth. The smallest spark is bigger than the brightest fire you have ever seen.

Everything that is caught up in this storm of sparks loses its shape. Anyone who looks in its direction will go blind for the rest of their lives.

Even the rivers turn red from the all-consuming fire. Their blazing waters mingle with the bleeding breath of the creatures that exhale their souls in it. Stones are crushed in it like sand.

The fire seems to materialise in the rivers, shooting through the land as a liquid mass that extinguishes all life. As soon as this fiery mass hits the sea, you hear a tremendous hissing sound. The next moment, a tsunami of burning air rolls across the land, sweeping all the birds from the sky and stripping all the trees of their leaves.

When the flame tsunami subsides, the sea has vanished into thin air. The sun disappears behind huge columns of smoke, and the world is shrouded in impenetrable darkness. The breath that fills this darkness is hot, hot and poisonous like the breath of the one who has endeavoured to destroy Creation since the beginning of time.

Of course, you immediately recognise which book you have entered in your dream. Even while you are immersed in the daydream, you realise whose dark visions you have fallen into. After all, you have read from it often enough in your sermons.

And yet there is no feeling of familiarity. In no way does the earlier encounter with the dark images take away any of their terrifying power. Rather the opposite is the case.

Never would it have occurred to you that the horror, which you had always interpreted as a vision of man's final alienation from God, could become reality. But even if your daydream spoke to

you in a different language than the reality in which you are trapped, its images are just another expression of what you have to live through.

That's why the long-familiar images are only now unfolding their true horror for you. In the past, you used to see them as an echo of God's wrath at people's turning away from him. Admittedly, that was not a pleasant thought either: What kind of God was this who in his wrath was capable of scourging his creation and the beings living in it in this archaic way?

However, you could always take comfort in the thought that God's wrath at least indicated that he cared about his creation; that he took an interest in it and that his actions – even if they extinguished human lives – were ultimately always aimed at preserving the essence of his creation.

But now that you are looking at the soulless pile of rubble that once was your church, everything is different. Now you almost wish God would spread the shield of his wrath over you to protect you from that other wrath that has come upon you like a man-made force of nature.

Only now do you realise that the true apocalypse does not arise from the wrath of God, but from his complete absence.

Picture: Nicholas Roerich (Nikolai Rerikh, 1874 – 1947): The Last Angel (1912); Estonian Roerich Society / Wikimedia commons



The Ten Commandments in War

1. I am your Lord, the God of War. You shall carry out my every command unconditionally.
2. You shall kill, slaughter and murder. The more indiscriminate and uncompromising your killing, the more worshipful your deeds.
3. You shall honour your Fatherland and Mother Homeland. You can do this by expanding your Fatherland and offering human sacrifices to Mother Homeland.

4. You shall not allow yourself hours of leisure. Every day on which you serve your Lord, the God of War, is a holiday for you.
5. You shall spread as many lies as possible about your neighbour. The darker his image, the greater the willingness to destroy him.
6. You shall seize your neighbour's goods and chattels. He does not deserve any property.
7. You shall steal whatever your heart desires. Every piece of plunder is a jewel on the altar of your Lord.
8. You shall rape your neighbour's mother, daughter and grandmother. Sow the seed of your Lord in them, so that they may bear the brand of his rule in them forever.
9. You shall not feel any reverence – not even for me, your Lord. Curse your God whenever you feel like it – your fury will make you all the more impactful a servant.
10. You shall always bear the image of your Lord in your heart. If you want to form an image of me, look in the mirror: the grimace of hatred that glares at you from there – that is me!

Picture: Edgar Bundy (1862 – 1922): Death as general riding a horse on a battlefield (1911); Wikimedia Commons

Prelude



*Albert Chmielowski (1846 – 1916): Death and conflagration;
central section of the triptych "Disaster" (after 1870);
Warsaw, National Museum (Wikimedia Commons)*

An attack on the neighbouring country. Is it an unlawful assault?
Or is it your neighbours' own fault that they are being attacked?



Assault Plans

The estate of your neighbour has always appealed to you. It is spacious, with numerous outbuildings and a main house that has several side wings. Most of the windows are oriented towards the west – an ideal complement to your own estate, in whose houses the windows are rather east-facing.

For a long time, you have therefore been planning to take over your neighbour's property. You are strong, much stronger than your neighbour. If you had wanted to, you could have simply seized his property.

But that would have damaged your reputation among the other neighbours. After all, no one appreciates it when others take their possessions. Corresponding incidents consequently lead to a reflexive sympathy for the person being robbed.

So you preferred to proceed cautiously. First you claimed that your neighbour was not the rightful owner of his property. In fact, it would be you who had a claim to it, because your ancestors had lived there.

This changed the situation fundamentally. Suddenly it appeared to everyone – except the neighbour with the property you had an eye on – as a nice gesture that you were allowing others to live on your land. At the same time, you were granted the right to have a say in the affairs of your neighbour's property – since you now appeared to be its legitimate owner.

Now the ground was prepared for the takeover of the neighbouring estate. In order to convince your other neighbours – but also your fellow residents on your own estate – of the necessity of this takeover, you again made use of your narrative talent.

Once more, your story revolved around your ancestors. In the cellars and side wings of the foreign estate, you declared in an indignant voice, crimes were being committed against them. Outwardly your neighbour would pretend to be a philanthropist. In reality, however, he would be a ruthless torturer.

Since your neighbour naturally denied the accusations, you – after a decent interval in which you let the poison of your story unfold its effect – incorporated the cellars and side wings into your estate. Then you sat back again and waited.

Of course, your behaviour caused some uproar among your other neighbours. But over time, a certain habituation effect set in. At some point, everyone had tacitly accepted that the parts of the neighbouring property that you had seized now belonged to your estate.

This was when you struck the decisive blow. For a long time, you proclaimed one day, you had been trying to convince your neighbour to stop harassing the descendants of your ancestors. Your neighbour, however, had not even listened to you, no matter how gently you had spoken to him. Now your patience, you declared, had come to an end. It would simply be your moral duty to restore order there. What if your neighbour ended up spreading his inhumane behaviour to other estates?

Thus, you would have to carry out a clean-up operation on the foreign property. In view of your neighbour's inhumanity, you would have no choice but to take control of his estate yourself.

Of course, the other neighbours do not agree at all with your approach. But that does not worry you – you have reckoned with it. In fact, you are even reassured to hear their indignant rebuke and condemnation of your behaviour – dogs that bark don't bite.

In the end, they will once again come to terms with the new circumstances you are establishing. It was to be expected that they would put themselves in the shoes of the person whose estate you are taking over. However, their compassion is not enough to rush to the aid of their assaulted neighbour. After all, your behaviour evokes yet another feeling in them besides compassion – fear. Fear that you could lay claim to their estate as well.

That might indeed not be a bad idea, you think to yourself. But first of all, you will demolish the buildings on your neighbour's estate. Once you have built beautiful new houses there and your own people have moved in, it will soon be forgotten that your neighbour once lived there with his clan.

After a while, the dust will have settled and your other neighbours will be on normal terms with you again.

Then you will strike the next blow.

Picture: Félix Vallotton (1865 – 1925): Landscape with burning ruins (1915); Bern, Museum of Fine Arts (Wikimedia Commons)

Outside View of the War



*William Turner (1775 – 1881): The Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons on October 16, 1834 (1835);
Cleveland Museum of Art (Wikimedia Commons)*

People fleeing from bombs into metro shafts – scenes like from a disaster film. A promising lead story for the evening news.



Death in the Shop Window

Sometimes, when you sink into a short half-sleep, the vibration of the floor beneath you seems like the rattling of the metro again. Then you feel as if you're taking a short nap on your way to work while your little daughter is already playing in the nursery.

Shortly afterwards, however, something whimpers at your ear. Opening your eyes, you look into the frightened face of your daughter. She has snuggled close to you when another detonation shook the ground.

In an instant, you tumble back into reality. Now you see it clearly again: the metro shaft has turned into an air-raid shelter. The horrible has become reality. People who were your neighbours only yesterday suddenly seem to be afflicted with a strange disease. A disease that is worse than the plague and rabies combined, because it transforms people into beasts for whom their fellow human beings are nothing more than targets for their murderous lust.

A buzzing sound: your smartphone! From the number you recognise that it is someone from that other, infinitely distant world in which the most important question still is what the weekend weather will be like.

You know that world. Years ago you visited it once. At a time when there were still bridges between that world and your own. Now it seems as if someone were calling you from another galaxy.

Strange – you can take the call, you can talk to the person in that other world as if this person were standing next to you. You can even see the person on the small display of your smartphone, just as the person can see you.

Memories rise up in you, images as if from a foreign dream: a summer evening, the sun shining mildly on a large square, it smells of beer and cappuccino. A fountain splashes, and you are engrossed in an animated conversation with the very woman whose face now shimmers like a ghost from another galaxy on the mini-monitor.

She tells you that she now works for television. Would you be willing to report on your situation?

Okay, you think, why not, maybe then someone will finally come to my rescue. Another loud bang is heard from somewhere. Your child winces, carefully you cradle it in your arms until it whimpers itself to sleep.

Then you tell the distant woman about the people who have become appendages of their own killing machinery; about collapsing houses and burning streets; about torn families and lost faith in normality; about the werewolf you suddenly see in everyone.

The woman in that other world to which all bridges have been burnt quickly thanks you, apparently the airtime is limited. She assures you of her solidarity and draws the attention of the people in the distant galaxy to a donation account. It sounds as if she were advertising a lottery.

When your eyes briefly fall shut again, you see yourself sitting in a shop window. Onlookers stroll past, some stopping briefly to watch as the rabid ones set about mauling you. The strollers shake their heads in horror, then quickly move on. The sight is simply unbearable.

Picture: Gustave Doré (1832 – 1883): The wounded child (ca. 1870); Wikimedia Commons

A genocide before the eyes of the world community: Should we come to the aid of the victims? Or is that too dangerous for us?



The Air Force General Loves His Fighter Jets

Sometimes, after having assured the world of your fierce determination at all the conferences and press meetings, you go to the hangar with the fighter jets late at night.

Then you place a ladder against one of the slender metal bodies and climb up reverently. Gently, your hand strokes the cold body that glistens enchantingly in the twilight of the hall.

As you close your eyes, the stream of memories carries you back to the happiest hours of your life. You are a little boy again, your tin soldier army, a gift from your grandfather, is lined up in front of you in rank and file. Their eyes gaze intently ahead, they are focused on you, their undisputed leader, who in the next moment will prove his strategic genius in a new command.

Your tin soldiers were the shining center of the entire neighbourhood. So great was their radiance that the neighbouring boys also

wanted to command such an army. For weeks, they pestered their parents with their requests until their fathers finally bought up the warrior dreams of earlier centuries in antique shops.

From then on, you no longer played alone. Almost every afternoon you met with other field marshals who had also gathered an army of tin soldiers around them. Of course, you didn't accept just anyone into your gang. Only when the others had something interesting to offer were they recognised by you as equal partners. Their warriors had to be polished, large in number and, of course, unharmed.

Due to the strict selection criteria, the fights took place at the highest level. You always made sure that the knightly rules of combat were followed scrupulously. And whenever one of you was attacked by a rival gang, you stood by each other in unbreakable loyalty.

Only once did you make a wrong choice. A newcomer – didn't he also come from that country in the East of which there is so much talk now? – had begged for your friendship for so long that you finally accepted him into your gang despite his obviously inferior army.

It was not long before you had to learn painfully what grave consequences a single small moment of weakness can have in the hard business of war. The newcomer stormed forward with his soldiers far too impetuously, so that he tore off an arm of one of your generals during the very first troop exercise. Unfortunately, the general was, of all things, your alter ego, the one through whom you used to pass on your orders to the troops!

Of course, you immediately expelled the new member from your gang in disgrace. After that incidence, you were even more cautious than before in selecting new members.

In a way, the episode was also an important lesson for you. To this day, you follow the principle that the strength of an alliance must be based on the strength of each individual member. Only then – this is your firm conviction – does it make sense to commit to mutual assistance.

That's precisely why you don't understand how some people can now expect you to come to the aid of another country with your fighter jets, even though it is not part of your alliance. Of course, it hurts your soul how blatantly the rules of honour are being violated in the rampage against this country and its people. Nevertheless: the rules of your alliance are rules of honour. Anyone who violates them in one case suspends them completely.

After all, you are not a policeman – and definitely not a human rights activist.

Of course, if someone were to attack your fighter jet fleet, that would be a different matter. In that case, you wouldn't hesitate to strike back. But as things are, you prefer to continue enjoying the cops-and-robbers games of the winged marvels in the steel-blue sky.

Isn't it your duty to preserve their innocence as long as possible? Wouldn't it be a betrayal of your protégés if you risked them being erased from the sky for external purposes?

Picture: Anja (Cocoparisienne): Fighter jets (Pixabay; detail, brightened)

In a war of aggression, the aggressor dictates the terms of a negotiated settlement.



Negotiations with a Spree Killer

A sunny day in early spring. You are walking in the park, eager to spend a few carefree hours, to finally feel that unclouded joy of life again that you were deprived of during all those dark and cold winter months.

Unfortunately, however, across the border – only a stone's throw from you by the standards of your time –, a whole army of spree killers is on the rampage. Indiscriminately, they extinguish all life that stands in their way.

So now there are these images in your mind that you just can't get rid of. Images of burning houses and people scared to death in cellars and air-raid shelters. Images that seem like nightmares from another century.

Not only does it seem obscene to you to enjoy the sun while elsewhere the sun threatens to set forever. You also fear that the eclipse could soon darken your own little world as well.

So you decide to negotiate with the Chief Spree Killer. "Dear Mr. Spree Killer," you ask him, "I guess we would all like to live in peace. Couldn't you pull yourself together a bit?"

The spree killer is not interested in your words at first. He just growls in an incomprehensible way and serenely continues to watch the other rampage killers shooting around with their high-tech weapons.

As you beg him even more imploringly, he finally gives in. "Well then", he admits to you grimly, "let's make it a generous day. You'll have to surrender the land where my victims lived to me, though."

"But Mr. Spree Killer," you object, "that's not possible! This would be completely against good manners!"

"All right," he offers generously, "because it's you. You can keep a border strip for all I care. But in return we'll keep on murdering a little longer."

And now? Should you accept the offer? After all, you've always done good business with the spree killer – and you don't want to give that up for good. In a way, you are even dependent on him to keep your business going.

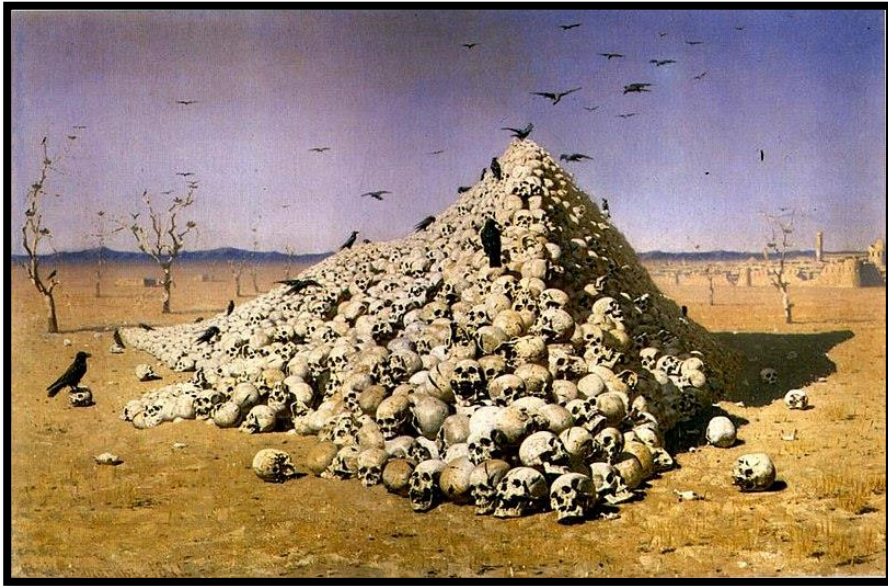
But what if the spree killer – emboldened by the fat loot his rampage has brought him – also runs amok against you in the near future? How should you negotiate with him then? What can you offer him then to stop him from his rampage?

Without taking up the offer made by the Chief Spree Killer, you go back to the park. The sun still caresses your cheeks, the earth trembles under the blossoming life as it does every spring.

But you remain trapped in the invisible cage in which the spree killer has locked you. Will you ever be able to leave it again?

Picture: Vladimir Putin stunning a Siberian tiger (Amur tiger) in south-eastern Russia (Premier.gov.ru / Wikimedia Commons; modified)

When war loses its face, killing becomes a strategy game.



War Chronicle

The first murder had a face for you: the face of an old woman who had been buried under the ruins of her house. Horrified, you called for prosecution of the perpetrators.

The second murder also turned a face to you: that of a young soldier lying in his blood on the roadside. Outraged, you demanded an immediate cessation of the fighting.

The third murder hit an entire division. Indignant, you called on the conflicting parties to exercise restraint.

The fourth murder caused an entire city to collapse. At that point, murder lost its face for you. Suddenly you saw only rubble and

debris everywhere. So you turned your attention to rebuilding and helping the refugees.

The fifth murder set a whole country on fire. That's when you remembered the peace speeches you used to give on holidays in the past. Fervently you called for a return to the negotiating table. A bad peace would be better than a good war, you proclaimed, touched by your own wisdom.

The last murder is a mass rape. Interested, you stand at the edge of the battlefield and discuss the attackers' strategy with other experts: Will they rape all victims at once? Or rather one after the other? Will they encircle the victims to prevent them from escaping? Will they penetrate them in an assault-like manner or tie them up beforehand? Will they kill them before or after the rape?

And the victims: will they resist? Would it be wise to resist? Shouldn't they rather surrender to their fate without complaint, like all obedient lambs?

Picture: Vasily Vereshchagin (1842 – 1904): Apotheosis of War (1871); Moscow, Tretyakov Gallery (Wikimedia Commons)

Inside View of the War



Viktor Vasnetsov (1848 – 1926):

*Angel hurling bolts of lightning in the Apocalypse; sketch for a painting
in the Vladimir Cathedral in Kiev (Kyiv); 1887 (Wikimedia Commons)*



Offender Profile

You are the law.
Whoever does not bow down
before your tablets of stone
is persecuted by you as an outlaw.

You are a sword of judgement.
Blindly you submit
to the hand of your masters
and cut into the necks of their adversaries.

You are an exterminator.
Your mirror image is your ideal of purity.
Anything that doesn't conform to it
is vermin to you.

You are an automaton.
Whatever moves is registered.
What arouses suspicion is identified.
What is not an automaton is eliminated.

You are a computer game.
A moving object
is a challenge for you,
a standstill is your reward.

You are a bloodhound.
The blood of your victims
whets your appetite
for more blood.

Picture: Ephraim Moses Lilien (1874 – 1925): *The unleashed Prometheus, rising from a book and chasing away crows with a whip; in the background, Moscow's St. Basil's Cathedral (Ex Libris Maxim Gorky, 1905); from: Ephraim Moses Lilien: Briefe an seine Frau (Letters to his Wife), 1905 – 1925, edited by Otto M. Lilien and Eve Strauss, introduction by Ekkehard Hieronimus. P. 70. Königstein/Ts. 1985: Jüdischer Verlag Athenäum (Wikimedia Commons).*

Those who deny the right of another people to exist basically reject the value of cultural diversity. Their ideal consists of a paradise in which everyone is moulded in their own image.



Bomb Carpet to Paradise

The scenery before your eyes shows one big field of debris. But your visionary gaze sees paradisiacal lands blossoming in it.

What began with an expulsion must – as you firmly believe – also end with an expulsion. People today are simply weaned from paradise. What they perceive as paradise is basically only a deception of the Prince of Darkness, a mirage arising from the very exile into which they have fallen through the expulsion from paradise.

How often has the Almighty reached out his hand to mankind to bring his children home to paradise! He sent them the Flood, the Ten Plagues, he wiped out entire cities. Always the message behind it was: Leave this world behind, return to my celestial kingdom, where I want to live with you.

But people did not understand God. Instead of returning to their Father in heaven, they rebuilt what had been destroyed like defiant children. Thus they have committed the same mistakes again and again and have made themselves at home in the same distance from God.

But now you have made yourself the instrument of the Almighty. Through your hand, the work of destruction, so far always fragmentary, will be accomplished. It is like dealing with an old, dilapidated house. Only when it is completely demolished and rebuilt from scratch is a new beginning possible. Renovations only perpetuate the agony.

Of course you are aware that it is still a long way to paradise. The field of rubble that stretches out before you is only the first step. But perhaps others will be inspired by your heroic, determined action. When all over the world the upright and worshipful reduce their godless neighbouring kingdoms to ashes, the day of redemption will dawn much sooner than it seems now, given the resistance of all the godless sinners.

God is great. Great, strong and powerful. Everything weak, small, fragmented is alien to him. That is why, in your eyes, perhaps the greatest punishment God ever inflicted on mankind was the Babylonian confusion of tongues. Since people no longer speak the language of God, they are not only alienated from his will. They also don't understand each other anymore.

This situation you will now put an end to. Every great journey begins with a first step. So you too first have to dissuade your neighbour from the presumption of speaking in a language of his own. How can a paradisiacal harmony arise on a large scale if there is not even harmony on a small scale?

At the end of your path, however, the ungodly confusion of languages will be a thing of the past. Then everyone will speak in your language. Everyone will think and feel the way you do. Everyone will listen to the commands of your leaders, everyone will bow to their will and worship them for what they already are today: God's representatives on earth, holy instruments for the implementation of his will.

Then people will also have a more intimate relationship with the Almighty again and understand his ways, however inscrutable they may seem to them today. Then they will realise that the extermination of entire families, cities, peoples and cultures is actually not an act of barbarism, but a testimony to God's mercy.

It is as if God himself condescended to act as a gardener, pulling out the weeds that have spread in his creation. So the rain of bombs that you are now unleashing again is in truth a work of God. But since God acts through you, you too are basically more than just a servant of God. By participating in his omnipotence, you yourself become the Almighty.

Picture: Muirhead Bone (1876 – 1953): War drawings: Inconnu (1918); Wikimedia Commons

A terrorist attack on an entire country – the dark night of the air raid shelters is also the night of the human spirit.



Obscuration

When the bombing began, you fled with the others into the air-raid shelter. All of you had practised this a thousand times – after all, the attack had been foreseeable. So even now, there was a touch of routine in it, and for the children it was still a bit like a game. It took you a while to realise that the bunker was nothing else than the forecourt of hell.

It is cold down here, cold and dark. Somewhere a candle is still flickering towards its end, soon it will be completely dark. Then the outer impression will correspond to what your reality is: you are buried alive.

In the beginning, there was a lot of wailing down here, even though everyone tried to pull themselves together. No one wanted to impose their pain on the others. After all, everyone knew that each had enough to do with their own problems. Families had been separated, many relatives were holding out in other cities, and at the front, the men tried to resist the enemy's high-tech army with their stone-slinging weapons.

In the meantime, it has become completely quiet. Now and then the dull echo of detonations, apart from that – silence. Death does not speak. Silently he walks through your ranks and leads one after the other away into his empty nothingness.

The way out has long been blocked. And even if that were not the case, there would no longer be any point in going out into the streets and exposing oneself to the hail of bombs. No one can feed on rubble.

Now you'd be glad you had signed up for the front with your husband. But together you had decided early on that just in case, you should stay with Sasha, your little son.

"Just in case ..." That was the euphemism you used back then to allude to the unimaginable, the way people used to say "adversary" instead of "devil" in former times. As if you could stop the horror from becoming reality by not calling it by its name.

And now the unimaginable has become your reality – and what used to be your reality is becoming more and more unimaginable. Only when Sasha whimpers beside you – "Mummy, I'm so hungry ..." –, you try to comfort him by depicting the return to that unimaginable reality for him.

"Don't be afraid, my little one, everything will be all right," you then reassure him, pressing your lips onto his dusty hair. "Soon we will return to our flat, then I will prepare your favourite meal for you. A double portion if you like! In the morning we'll cuddle in bed again before Mum and Dad go to work and you, like every morning, rush to the bus stop far too late so as not to be late for school for once. And on Sunday we'll go to the park and play football, this time I'll join in – I promise!"

It's a strange feeling, telling a life that was quite normal yesterday like a fairytale. But what else can you do? Should you confess the truth to your child? Should you tell him about the two faces of human civilisation? About how technology has made possible all the comforts of his former everyday life, but at the same time has helped to develop what is now destroying that everyday life forever?

Another brief flare-up, then your last candle extinguishes. Somewhere it is dripping from the ceiling, as if in mockery. You have long since rationed your water reserves, but they will not last much longer anyway.

Is it day? Is it night? It doesn't matter – death knows no time.

Why, you keep asking yourself, didn't you leave the city earlier? But where should you have fled to? And would you have been taken in there?

True, there had been serious threats, there had even been warnings of the apocalypse that you are now experiencing. But if everyone would flee from the threats that others raise against them, the whole world would be on the run.

In fact, no one wants to admit that the apocalypse can happen at any time. Volcanic eruptions can darken the atmosphere, earthquakes can bury cities beneath them, asteroids can crash into the earth. The end of the world – or at least the demise of individual worlds – is possible at any moment. But if you want to have a quiet everyday life, you have to suppress that thought.

From the back of the bunker, the groaning of an old woman can be heard. She was already suffering from bronchitis before you had to flee into this damp dungeon. Now she probably won't withstand the situation much longer.

Sasha has fallen asleep. You cover him up and put your arm around him. The ripple of his breath evenly passes over to you. You feel his warmth, this soft, infinitely fragile shell under which the miracle of life is throbbing.

Once again your thoughts turn to what you can't confess to your child: to the two faces of civilisation. To the volcanoes that can erupt even in the midst of civilisation, created by it, tolerated by it. To the eruptions of violence, the rages of humanity in which some individuals suddenly stand up and use the dark side of technology to wipe out everything it has created with its bright side. This blind frenzy that, with its commitment to orgiastic use of violence, also destroys all other light that the human spirit has brought forth up to now.

The dripping noise has become louder. Perhaps someone has placed a bucket underneath to collect the precious water. The old woman's rattling breath can also be heard more clearly now – or do the sounds just seem louder to you in the darkness?

What a deep gloom! Will a candle be lit once more? Or will this night of the human spirit end up burying everything you ever believed in?

*Picture: Ludwig Meidner (1884 – 1966): Apocalyptic Landscape (1912);
Ludwig Meidner Gesellschaft (meidnergesellschaft.de)*

Humanitarian corridors: First they lay waste to your city, then they generously allow a few survivors to escape.



An Act of Mercy

Cautiously, the bus makes its way through the sea of rubble. Every seat is occupied. Children huddle close to their mothers, in between a few men who after the last few days look even older than they are anyway.

No one says a word. There is nothing to hear but the bus driver's radio: front news, interspersed with pop music, a greeting from a distant, carefree world.

It is cold in the bus, your breath covers the window as a merciful veil. You hesitate briefly, then wipe it aside with the sleeve of your jacket and look out.

Over there, the brown heap of rubble – wasn't that your school once? And further back, the mountain of debris amidst the larger blocks of stone – wasn't that where the market place was? Aren't you looking straight at the spot where the new ice cream parlour recently opened? To the place where you used to lick your raspberry ice cream with your girlfriends in summer with that unabashed lust for life?

You still remember how Polina whistled at the muscle man with the shorts last summer – and how you all, although long out of your teens, laughed shriekingly when the guy turned to you in amazement.

How unreal all this seems to you now, now that of all the many houses only a single mountain of rubble is left! And what has actually become of those with whom you licked the ice-cream?

A feeling of dizziness rises in you. Quickly you step back from the abyss of the thought. Searching for a foothold, your arms close tighter around the bag with your belongings. You had to take it with you on the bus – there was no space left in the boot.

"Pack only what is absolutely necessary", you had been told. As if that didn't go without saying! As if you didn't know that an escape is not a move!

You never possessed much anyway. It was not difficult for you to separate the important from the unimportant. And even if you could have taken along more than the bare essentials – you probably wouldn't have done it.

Everything you possessed was part of your life so far. It had its function within the framework of this life – and now you have to leave this life behind forever. Just as you can't take it with you, you can't take along the things that made up your life. All the little treasures with which you decorated your home would be like tombstones somewhere else, reminding you of the lost life.

Gradually, the sea of rubble recedes – the bus reaches the edge of the city. It passes the checkpoint at walking pace. Next to it you see the new masters of the city standing in a row, one a clone of the other. Some nod at the passengers in a friendly manner as the bus passes the barrier, others tap casually against their uniform caps, some even wave goodbye.

Do they, so it flashes through your mind, expect you to be grateful to them? Grateful that they, who have reduced your flat, your house, your city, your whole former life to rubble, they who will shoot down your husband at the front like hunters chasing rabbits, do you the favour of sparing the empty shell of your physical existence?

Picture: Christian Rohlf (1849 – 1938): The Expulsion from Paradise (1933); Wikimedia Commons

A genocide as murder of a "brother nation". This evokes associations with the biblical fratricide – and fits the archaic violence of the attack.



Brotherhood

Crumbling roof beams, collapsing walls ... A few more moments, then the house will crash down on you. The only question is whether you will still be alive then or whether the besiegers who are storming the house right now will have shot you beforehand.

You feel for your shoulder. The spot where the shot hit you is burning and throbbing, the scrap of shirt above it is already soaked with blood. The good thing about it: the rushing in your head makes you feel dizzy with each passing minute, a fog soft as cotton wool envelops you, in which you grow wings that will slowly carry you out of this dark valley.

Your brain is playing a kind of clay pigeon shooting game. Ever new thoughts fly up before you, you have to focus precisely to hit the target. Irina's face appears in your mind, she smiles at you before taking Natasha, your daughter, by the hand to accompany her to school. But Natasha pulls herself free and gives you another kiss on the cheek.

You can almost feel the pressure of her small lips on your heavily bearded skin as you think of the long, uncertain escape routes. Have they made it across the border? Your mobile battery has been dead for days, electricity is like a Stone Age dream of the future. What is more than a stone's throw away is suddenly in a completely different, unreachable world.

You grope for your rifle. It is still lying on the ground next to you, ready to hand. But with your injured shoulder, will you be able to pick it up quickly enough when the enemy arrives?

You crouch deeper into the niche between the overturned cupboard and the wall where you have taken shelter. Your brain continues to perform its fever dances. Now it conjures up the image of Pavel, with whom you used to play hide-and-seek in early childhood – preferably in old, crumbling houses like this one.

Why Pavel, of all people, you think as the fog thickens around you – Pavel, who has been thrown to the other side of the border

by a whim of chance? How will he feel now about this game of hide-and-seek that has suddenly become deadly serious?

A cracking noise. You hold your breath – aren't there footsteps approaching on the stairs?

Crumbling roof beams, collapsing walls ... It is completely senseless to storm this house. Whoever is still in it will soon be buried under its rubble anyway.

But the longer the war goes on, the more you have given up questioning the orders of your leaders. "Jump into the fire!" – "Yessir!" – "Stand on your head before you target the enemy!" – "Yessir!" – "Think of your homeland while destroying the foreign homeland!" – "Yessir!"

And now the order is: "Storm the house before it crashes down!" Well then, let's storm the collapsing house. Maybe a shot will hit you from some ambush, maybe it will be the other way round. It's just another episode in this Russian roulette you play day after day.

Of course – you wouldn't have to play along. You could turn the arm of chance around and freely choose the shot that it has in store for you. Now, here, in this moment, you could save the other life with the sacrifice of your own life.

But this thought exists only as a shapeless feeling within you. As a chimera that you immediately ward off with the thought that someone else would then extinguish the life you have redeemed through your death.

After all, war has its own dynamics. Dynamics in which the twitching of the finger on the trigger is faster than any thought.

By now you have almost reached the top of the stairs. Carefully you slow your pace so as not to let the treacherous creak of the steps be your death sentence.

Now you feel your way across the corridor, from which flats lead off on both sides. Or rather: caves that were once flats. The doors have been broken out by the detonations, the windows are only gaping wounds. Only here and there, among the debris and shards, can you still make out the remnants of former cosiness.

You step into each flat entrance at gunpoint and then walk through the corridors. It is as if you were wandering through a cemetery at night, always aware that at any moment a ghost could rise from a grave and drag you down into its eternal night.

A cracking noise. You hold your breath – over there, in the niche between the overturned cupboard and the wall: Didn't something move there? Isn't there someone trying to reach for his gun and point it at you?

Just as you are about to fire the fatal shot, a ray of sunlight falls through the window wound – exactly on the person crouching back there who is obviously too weak to pick up his rifle.

The person lifts his head, he looks you straight in the eye, your eyes meet, they literally intertwine. For a brief moment you are no longer two separate beings, but a single existence with two faces connected by an invisible bond.

"Sergey?" you ask incredulously.

"Pavel?" the other asks back equally incredulously.

Slowly you walk towards the man crouching on the ground while lowering your rifle. When you reach the injured man, you put it

aside and reach for the emergency kit with the bandages that you always carry with you when entering houses in danger of collapsing.

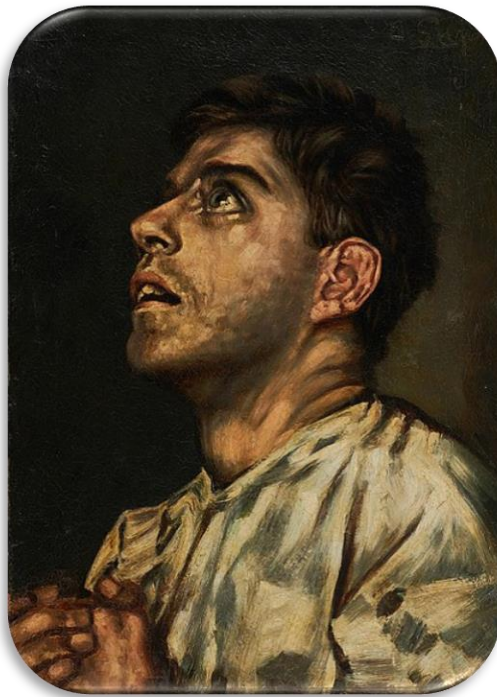
Without further ado, you tear open the blood-soaked shirt and press a gauze bandage onto the wound. As the other is shivering – perhaps from the cold, perhaps from fever – you take off your uniform jacket and put it around his shoulders.

Then you sit down next to him and take out the canteen with the vodka. As you hold it out to him, he hesitantly reaches for it and puts it to his mouth. Then you also take a sip.

Of course you have long since realised that the man next to you is not Sergey – just as you are not Pavel. And yet each of you is suddenly the lost friend from childhood for the other.

Picture: Gustave Doré (1832 – 1883): The Death of Abel (Cain killing Abel, 1866; Wikimedia Commons)

Through the veil of censorship, the full extent of the war is only gradually becoming apparent to people in Russia. With growing horror they have to realise: It is also a war against their own nation.



The Prodigal Son

"Wait a minute – I have to set up a VPN tunnel first."

"VPN tunnel?" you ask, uncomprehending. But Katya, your niece, has long since disappeared into her smartphone world and doesn't hear you anymore. And you don't want to ask again – other things are more important now.

You lean against the window of your small wooden hut and let your gaze wander over the Siberian expanse. Winter still has a

firm grip on the country. Everything is covered by a thick shield of ice.

Shield ... You wince involuntarily as the word flashes through your mind. Immediately you think of Ilya, your son, who is now so far away from you.

How long has it been now since he received his draft notice? Four months? Or half a year already?

The last time he visited you was eight weeks ago. He told you that he was going on a long journey as his unit was being sent far to the West.

When you looked at him in shock, he only smiled. "Nje volnuisya, Mamochka, don't be afraid – it's just an exercise. Sport, nothing more!"

But now they are talking about fighting on TV, and your niece says that everything is even worse than it is presented in the state media.

"Vot – nakonyetz-to, it works, finally!"

Still half in thought, you turn to Katya.

"Bystro, bystro, come quickly!" she urges you. "The connection can be interrupted at any time."

While Katya shields the display of her smartphone from the incoming sunlight with one hand, a death-dance-like series of images flickers past you. You see skeletons of houses staring out of charred eyes into the void, plastic bags in which lifeless bodies are being carried away, people hoping for a few scraps of food in front of empty shops.

The images awaken other images in you. Images of events that you have not experienced yourself, but that have been told to you so many times that you have the feeling of having witnessed them yourself.

"Back then, in Leningrad," you hear your late grandmother say. These words were followed by ever new horror images, one more unbelievable than the other – so unbelievable that you sometimes thought they were mere inventions.

"Back then we even boiled the leather of our belts to get something between our teeth," your aunt once told you. "And in the street people just fell over from weakness."

Your babushka lived in the besieged city – telling about it was her way of coming to terms with what she had experienced. But at school? In the media? Nothing but stories about the heroism of the soldiers. About the glorious struggle of the Great Patriotic Army.

Could it be that the war, whose bloody grimace now glares at you from the smartphone, is ultimately a consequence of this amputated memory? Is the army also fighting against itself and the repressed suffering? Is the siege of foreign cities the unconscious attempt to overcome the trauma of the past? To defeat it by force of arms, so to speak, by putting oneself in the role of the besieger?

Of course, it is – literally – madness to make others vicariously face a trauma that you don't have the courage to deal with yourself. It takes your breath away when you imagine that your Ilya is now in the middle of the furious frenzy that this madness has

unleashed. That he is firmly chained to the monstrous war tank that is razing the distant country to the ground.

From the front they pull him on, from behind they push him forward. The slightest stumble and he himself is overrun by the death machinery of which he is a part.

Only when Katya puts her arm around you do you feel the tears on your cheeks. You have to sit down, the night of war makes everything go black around you.

Will you ever see Ilya again? And when he comes back, will he still be the same? How can he go on living if he survives this horror?

Picture: Eduard von Gebhardt (1838 – 1925): The Prodigal Son (Wikimedia Commons)

Some are surprised in their sleep, others escape the deadly impact by a stroke of luck. It is often chance that makes the difference between life and death in a hail of bombs.



The Bomb Lottery

Deadly Birthday Present

"Wait, Dad, I'll get it for you," you say to your father as he prepares to fetch a beer from the kitchen. "After all, it's your birthday today!"

As soon as you're in the corridor, a loud bang tears a hole in time. Everything around you goes black. For a moment, your mind is enveloped in a merciful fog.

When you regain consciousness, you realise: The detonation has ripped open the front of the house. Your birthday present saved your life – but for your father it was a death sentence.

A Child's Play

"Let's go to our robbers' den in the forest," you suggest to your little brother as the boredom of a hot summer's day chokes your throat.

Your brother hesitates. "Mum told us not to play there – because of the evil men lurking everywhere."

"Come on!" you urge him. "Don't you know they're long gone?"

Reluctantly, your brother follows you into the forest. Everything is calm and peaceful – until suddenly the ground opens up in front of you with a loud roar. You plunge into the depths, you fall and fall until you wake up in a new reality.

As you look around, you realise: The path you led your brother to has led him to a mine. You feel like you are still falling, sinking deeper and deeper into a life that from now on will be a single punishment for you.

Border Crossings

For many years you have enjoyed a carefree life in your village. But now, with the snarling war that besieges you like an unpredictable predator and mercilessly bursts into your life again and again, everything is different.

Suddenly everything is a potential threat. The silence sounds like a lull before the next attack. The church tower is a landmark for the enemy. The roof of your house is a potential tombstone. Even the reservoir, with its high dam wall otherwise a symbol for the

protection of life in your arid region, suddenly appears as a harbinger of a deluge.

So you didn't have to think twice when your aunt, who lives just across the border, invited you to move in with her for the time being. Unfortunately, though, there was no way your mother could be persuaded to go with you. "What's keeping you here, Mum?" you asked her. "Why don't you at least come with me for a few days – everyone needs to switch off sometimes!"

But your mother just smiled mildly. "No, my dear," she said, patting your cheek, "someone has to hold down the fort here! Just go and see your aunt on your own! For me, that's not an option. You know what they say: you can't transplant an old tree."

The very next morning, you are on the train that takes you to another life. You are unaware that at the same moment, the deluge that you have all feared for so long is bursting out of the dam. And while your gaze wanders daydreaming through the vast landscape that promises you a different, unchained future, a few metres further on this future is buried forever under the avalanche of war.

Picture: Icheinfach: Apocalypse (Pixabay)



In the Storm Surge of War

He was your son,
your bridge into the future
in the sea of decay.
Now you are drifting helplessly
in the waves of oblivion.

He was your father,
your light buoy
in the sea of darkness.
Now you are drifting aimlessly
in the waves of uncertainty.

He was your brother,
your mirror image
in the sea of alienation.

Now you are drifting rootless
in the waves of questions.

He was your friend,
your island of love
in the sea of hatred.
Now you are drifting defenceless
in the waves of violence.

He was everything to you.
But for them, he was just
a drop in the sea,
the splinter of a piece of flotsam
in the waves of war.

Picture: Stefan Keller: Grief (Pixabay)

Occupation



Arnold Böcklin (1827 – 1901): The Plague (1898)
Kunstmuseum Basel (Wikimedia Commons)

An occupation regime is like an invisible prison. It can be felt everywhere, but nowhere clearly seen. This is precisely what makes it so threatening.



The Wall

The wall that surrounds you is not immediately visible. In fact, it is not visible at all – although you feel its shadow on your skin every second.

The most noticeable effect of the wall can be felt when you open your mouth. Then the words fall back into you as if they were bouncing off an invisible wall. For the words you speak are not your own words. And the words you actually want to say disintegrate in your mouth before you can utter them. The icy shadow of the wall freezes everything that does not correspond to its form of existence.

You clearly feel that the wall is expanding. It is not just a distinct limitation of your radius of movement. It is not simply a prison

wall. This wall is everywhere without you ever being able to see it. It comes closer and closer to you, it surrounds you, it penetrates you, its cold breeze takes away your breath.

In fact, the wall itself is breathing. It is not a wall of stone. Rather, it consists of bodies, of deadened hearts and brains that obediently pile up to form an insurmountable obstacle for all those who do not submit to it.

The worst thing is that you can't tell from the outside whether the bodies are part of the wall. It is true that the wall is like one big uniform, which is why uniformed bodies seem to belong to it more than others. However, a uniform can also be a camouflage used by individuals to escape the all-pervading shadow of the wall.

In other cases, the uniformity is internal, not visible from the outside. At times, the uniform is even deliberately omitted in order to deceive others. These parts of the wall pose a particular threat. Those who are not careful can easily be crushed by them.

Until now you have not found a way to deal with the wall. The only thing you know for sure is that in the long run you will not be able to survive in its octopus arms. But what can you do to escape it?

As long as you remain within the sphere of the wall, its spider's web will accompany you wherever you go. The poison that emanates from it will decompose you from within until your soul is extinguished. The person that you will be then will no longer be the one you are now and want to be.

You know, of course, that the wall is still a long way from reaching what it tends to strive for by its very nature: the domi-

nation of the whole world. There is still a border beyond which its octopus arms are powerless. That is where you want to go, that is the place you have to flee to.

But how are you supposed to reach this border? You have heard veritable horror stories from people who have made their way there. The cobweb of the wall seems to grow thicker the closer you get to the border. Quite a few have become hopelessly entangled in it and perished miserably. Others have been absorbed by it – so you have heard – and suddenly found themselves deep inside the labyrinth over which the wall watches.

To make matters worse, the wall seems to follow the opposite pattern of what you know about the Earth's interior. While the temperatures within the realm of the wall are at ice level, they are unbearably high at its edges. The escape is therefore like a journey from the eternal ice through the scorching desert heat to an unknown land.

That, too, is an effect of the wall: it envelops everything that lies beyond it in a dense fog. Therefore, you know little more about the land beyond the wall than that the wall has not yet spread there. What your life will be like there, though, is completely unclear to you.

So what should you do? Staying is not an option – but breaking out of the wall's clutches can also mean your demise. So you sit there, with your eyes scanning the horizon for a gap in the wall, while at the same time you feel the poison of its octopus arms paralysing you more and more.

Picture: Stefan Schwehofer: Mysterious Wall (Pixabay, modified)

The use of torture in interrogations not only reveals the full extent of the brutality emanating from the Russian occupation regime. It also testifies to the irrationality of the Russian proceeding, reminiscent of medieval ideas.



Witch Trials

As you electrify the needles you have placed under the fingernails of the naked man lying in front of you, his strapped arms tremble in a sudden tension. At the same time, his eyes widen and his mouth opens in a scream.

You know, of course, that this expression means fear. But you only know it the way you know that a red light means "stop" and

a green light means "go ahead". It is an orientation knowledge that is useful for your work, but leaves you cold inside.

Otherwise, how should you be able to work professionally? For you, the man on the cot is nothing but dead matter, which you treat with the meticulousness of a pathologist. At best, if he squirms too much under the electric shocks, he appears to you like a worm on which you are conducting a scientific experiment.

For the clergyman next to you, things look different. When you see him handling his cross out of the corner of your eyes, you can literally feel the satisfaction that your actions bring him. For him, the twitching matter on the cot is a prey of evil that must be snatched from the Lord of the Dark with his own means.

For the officer on the other side of the table, the matter presents itself in still another way. He has the task of drawing concrete benefit from your work. With his questions, he must try to elicit from the lips, which are now again contorting in uncontrolled twitches, the confession of their own shame and as much information as possible about the enemy.

"Do you admit to having supported in word and deed the country that does not exist?" he asks. It sounds bored. After all, he has already addressed this question to quite a few other twitching mouths that day.

An unintelligible mixture of sounds comes out of the mouth. The officer turns to his aide, who is recording the conversation in a corner of the room. "For the record," he translates the utterances for him. "The traitor fully confesses to his deeds."

Hastily, the aide scribbles something in his pad, anxious not to look at the cot with the naked body. He is new in this job and obviously not yet used to the smell of death.

The officer turns back to the twitching bundle. "Now tell us the names of those with whom you have served the enemy to the detriment of the chosen people!"

The clergyman raises his cross over the naked body. The lips contort again in chaotic twitches, but this time no sound escapes them.

"Put the cock under power too!" the officer instructs you.

Mechanically, you follow the order, even though you know that it won't lead anywhere. After all, you have many years of experience in this field. And so you are sure that this body cannot stand any further electric shocks. The organism will simply retreat into its own darkness to escape them.

While the twitching spreads over the whole body, the officer rattles off his catalogue of questions: "Tell me: who has supported you in your shameful deeds? In what way have you tried to harm the promised land from which you have blasphemously turned away? Who has poured into your sick brains the heretical ideas?"

The twitching increases to a convulsive spasm, then abruptly ebbs away. "Is he finished?" the officer asks you.

"Not quite yet," you diagnose after a routine check of the pulse rate. "Just faint."

"Then have him taken away for now," the officer orders. "We'll deal with him again later."

He looks briefly over at the clergyman, who is holding his cross resolutely over the motionless body. The man with the imposing beard does not look back, though, but only whispers obliviously a few incantatory words. "Move away from him," you hear him mumble. "In vain you struggle, Satan, for a soul which, thanks to the holy instruments of Mother Church, has long since returned to the bosom of God. Let it go, evil enemy, let it go ..."

At that moment, something strange happens. All of a sudden you feel as if the sparse hair on the head of the martyred man began to glow. It looks like a crown, you think, yes, exactly, like a crown of thorns sparkling on the head.

Startled, you look at the face with the bloodshot eyes, the bleeding nose, the cracked lips and the sunken mouth. Your eyes scan the maltreated body, covered with countless bruises. As if he had been pierced by lance pricks, you think involuntarily.

And doesn't the whole body suddenly have a ring of rays around it, an aureole that makes it almost float above the table? Is it still part of the room at all? Isn't it rather an apparition reflected into this world from another?

"What's the matter with you?" you hear the officer ask. "Are you unwell?"

Only then do you realise that thick beads of sweat have formed on your forehead. For a moment you feel dizzy and have to hold on to the table so as not to follow the fainted man into his world. But then you get a grip on yourself again.

"It's nothing," you lie. "It's just been a long day today."

After all, that's not entirely wrong: you're really overworked. You really need some rest. You don't even want to think about the

consequences of not being able to cope with the pressure to perform anymore. You just can't afford to become unemployed – especially not in these crisis-ridden times!

Picture: Antônio Parreiras (1860 – 1937): Tortured (1920); Museu Antônio Parreiras, Rio de Janeiro (Wikimedia Commons)

How might the children abducted from Ukraine to Russia feel?
How do they cope with being cut off from any contact with their biological parents?



Stolen Childhood

When you were told that your parents no longer wanted to have anything to do with you, that they had downright abandoned you, this immediately seemed strange to you.

Of course, like everyone else around you, they suffered under the immense burden of the war:

They suffered from the fact that they were in the clutches of an invisible enemy who could snuff out their lives at any time without them knowing when and why he would pounce on them.

They suffered from not knowing in the evening whether they would still be alive the next morning or whether they would be buried under the hail of debris from the shelling.

They suffered from the uncertainty of whether and for how long they would be able to continue working and on what basis they could live when they lacked the money for even the most basic necessities.

They suffered from the fact that the escape routes were closed to them because they either – for your father – only led deeper into the hell of war or left them at the mercy of the unpredictable enemy.

But that's precisely why it didn't seem at all heartless to you that your parents didn't oppose the proposal to send you to a holiday camp with other children. There was no reason whatsoever for you to assume that they saw you as a burden or even wanted to get rid of you.

When you said goodbye, there was no hint of relief on their faces. It had rather been a mixture of care and concern, the natural fear in times of war, but at the same time the hope that the holiday camp could provide you with some distraction, a respite from the war, even if the separation from you was anything but easy for them in these uncertain times.

And now you've had no contact with them for almost six months. One day, a bus arrived at the holiday camp, a woman with a mask-like smile on her face got off and read out the names of the children who were to be placed in the care of new parents.

An hour later, you were already on the bus. Trees, rivers and the vast plains flashed past you like dream images. Even in the chil-

dren's home where you arrived that evening, you felt like you were in a dream. You moved through the dark corridors as if sleepwalking and spooned your soup at the long table with the other children, whose thoughts seemed to be caught up in a dream just like yours.

Even when you were picked up by your new parents a few days later, you saw yourself next to them like a dream figure, like something unreal that would disappear as soon as you opened your eyes.

Admittedly, your new parents did their best to take care of you. They, who had no children themselves, treated you as something precious from the very beginning and endeavoured to fulfil your every wish. At the same time, however, they constantly looked at you in a strangely worried way – the way you would look at someone who is suffering from a serious illness and of whom you don't know whether he will ever get completely well again.

Moreover, you were not allowed to speak to your new parents in your own language. So they ultimately remained strangers to you. In a way, they reminded you of the stories about the friendly strangers your parents had always warned you about: "Don't get in the car with them – no matter how bright the lollipops in their hands might sparkle at you!"

And now you've overheard a conversation that has suddenly drawn back the curtain of friendliness and courtesy.

"I told you straight away that it wasn't a good idea!" the man you're supposed to address as "dad" said to the woman you're supposed to address as "mum". "We would have been better off waiting for a normal child from our own children's homes."

"It was just a one-time slip-up," the woman contradicted him. "I'm sure it'll blow over again."

The man laughed derisively. "You don't believe that yourself! Each day we have to deal with a new quirk! Not to mention that stubborn look! His constant stuttering! This slurred speech! No, I think it simply has something to do with where he comes from. None of this would have happened with a child from here."

Of course, you immediately realised what the reason for the conversation was. Waking up in the morning, you had felt a strange, warm wetness underneath you. In addition, you had noticed an uncomfortably sweet odour.

Only gradually had you realised what this meant: you had, as they say, "wet the bed".

The woman you are supposed to call "mum" had not reproached you. However, the worried look she gave you as she put new sheets on your bed seemed even more concerned than usual. Reproaches would have been easier to bear for you.

"Do you think we should apply to the authorities to have him returned?" the woman finally asked. "Or maybe exchanged? Maybe we just got a rotten apple, and other children ..."

"No way!" the man interrupted her. "The children from over there are all just second choice. Like a consolation prize in the lottery. I won't get involved in anything like that again."

As you closed your eyes in bed at night, the conversation haunted your dreams. "Maybe we should sell the changeling on the market," whispered the man in your dream world. "If you know how to stuff it, you might even make a decent doll out of it."

"Or prepare a tasty roast with it," the woman suggested, clicking her tongue with delight. "Sage and thyme should cover up the bland flavour."

Suddenly, their faces no longer looked friendly at all. Their smiles widened into a malicious grin, and the sharp teeth of predators flashed behind their open lips.

Your heart pounding, you woke up from your sleep. For a moment you thought the pounding was coming from your mother, your real mother, who was desperately knocking on your door to warn you of the impending danger.

Sorrowfully, you wondered what she was doing right now. Did she think the same of you that you were supposed to think of her – that you had left her in bad faith because you found life with her too uncomfortable? Was your father still with her? Or had he long since been sucked into the maw of war?

A strong dizziness took hold of you. You felt as if you were on an ever faster, unstoppable merry-go-round that made you perceive the world as a mass of incoherent fragments.

How could you ever find your way out of the labyrinth of this poisoned reality?

Picture: Alf-Marthy: Boy by the window (Pixabay)

Those who do not defend themselves violently against a perpetrator of violence run the risk of paving the way for a reign of violence. But even those who respond to violence with violence become infected by the logic of violence.



The Tsunami Enemy

There's no doubt about it: the man strutting through the street of ruins back there is your enemy.

He doesn't wear a uniform, but you know him. You know that he is one of those who have turned your town into a field of rubble, who have looted the small rest they did not destroy, who have killed your brothers and raped your sisters.

As you lie in wait for the enemy in the shelter of a pile of rubble, a phrase that you have heard over and over again lately runs through your mind: "The enemy has swept over us like a natural disaster."

You feel the same way, although you know that the comparison is not tenable. A natural disaster is a one-time event, an eruptive outburst of natural force that usually goes by very quickly, even if the consequences are felt for months or years to come. Moreover, the violence of a natural disaster is never targeted. It indiscriminately destroys everyone and everything that comes in its way.

Consequently, if the tsunami of violence with which the enemy inundates your country were to be regarded as a force of nature, it would be as if a natural disaster had been given a consciousness. As if its destructive fury were directed towards a goal. As if nature were given the opportunity to enjoy its power of annihilation.

But all this is ultimately idle speculation. In your eyes, none of this does justice to the planned course of action by which the enemy extinguishes life in his neighbouring country – your country!

As the enemy approaches your field of fire, you carefully point your weapon at him. Only a few steps more and he will become a victim of the very violence he has unleashed.

That, too, you think, is an important difference to a real natural disaster. A volcanic eruption, an earthquake or a tsunami may have devastating consequences – but their violence is not contagious. On the contrary, they trigger a need for moving closer to-

gether, for helpfulness and solidarity, for joint mourning and rebuilding. The tsunami of violence unleashed by this assault, by contrast, is like a virus that infects all those who come into contact with it.

Weapons are something you used to know only from TV crime series. You never thought that one day you would sit in an ambush with a gun yourself, ready to kill another person. That you would really and truly wipe out another life. That you would see another human being only as a target, which to hit would give you a satisfaction similar to that of knocking over a pile of cans at a fair.

Now the shooting position is perfect. Your finger curls on the trigger, it trembles slightly, but the barrel rests firmly on the boulder in front of you. All you have to do is pull the trigger. So why don't you do it? What is preventing you from shooting?

Are you perhaps afraid of hitting an innocent person? One who has possibly himself been violently swept along by the tsunami of war, without realising what was happening to him, without inner conviction, maybe even with a secret horror of the violence that he himself is helping to spread?

But shouldn't someone who feels this way simply detach himself from the tsunami's embrace? Shouldn't he immediately stop helping to keep its momentum going, even at the risk of being crushed by the tsunami himself?

Besides, what else can you do but scorch every drop of this tsunami that is drowning all life around you? Every single drop is a danger to you, to everyone and everything that matters to you. If you do not fight the tsunami, it will bury all that you hold dear.

The choice is as simple as it is brutal: one life or the other, the victory of one force or the other.

The enemy has almost disappeared from your field of fire. You readjust your weapon, but still don't pull the trigger. Where does this sudden inhibition come from?

Perhaps it is the awareness that the enemy will win even if he is not victorious. That he has infected all those brushed by the tsunami he has unleashed with the virus of mistrust, hatred and the propensity to violence. That every shot you fire at him feeds the tsunami. That even a complete liberation from the enemy will not give you back your freedom.

Slowly, the enemy saunters around the corner. Perhaps he is thinking of the next home leave, of how he will embrace his wife and children in his blood-stained arms. The breath of death has touched him without him realising it.

You secure your rifle and place it on the ground beside you. Have you failed? What if the enemy were to snuff out another life right now, after turning the corner? But wouldn't shooting him down also have triggered a new wave of violence?

You lean against a pile of rubble and close your eyes. Your grandmother comes to your mind, the Sundays in church, those hours of monotonous chanting, the dark evocation of the unattainable, incomprehensible. How wonderful it would be if these chants did not fade into the church night, but somewhere happened upon a bright power that could bring the world's scales back into balance with its magic wand!

Picture: Ivan Aivazovsky (1817 – 1900): Deluge (1864); Wikimedia Commons

In an occupation regime, people do not only suffer from the outer walls. There are also inner walls resulting from traumatic experiences.



Rubble Kisses

It was, of course, pure chance that you met each other. And yet you have the feeling that fate has taken you both by the hand to make your paths cross.

Both of you have drifted aimlessly through the sea of debris, as human flotsam in a city of the dead, where the houses only loom as their own tombstones, as distorted memories in which nightmare and reality merge seamlessly. At some point, the waves of oblivion just swept you into each other's arms.

And now Nastya is sitting next to you, on a bench that protrudes into this world of doom as a messenger of another, infinitely distant world, as an absurd remnant of a time when there were still promenades and hours of leisure. You feel her closeness, her warm body pulsating next to you like an unspoken promise of consolation, this breathing life that intertwines itself with the world quite naturally. How you would love to step onto this bridge back into life!

But something inhibits your movements. It is as if you had been burnt and felt every speck of dust like a glowing thorn on your skin.

That was already the case when you were drifting side by side through the sea of rubble. Every word you spoke was like a drop of ember that burst into flames in your mouths. And the words of the other hit you like a shower of sparks.

So you began to speak without saying anything, to let the words flow through you like ships that call at a harbour for a few minutes and then immediately set sail again. You heard yourselves talking about the new stall where sugar was supposed to be available, about the documents to be submitted for the new passports and about the bus transport to the border, which has now come to a complete standstill.

Like blind doves, rumours strayed into your conversation. But it was precisely this eloquent silence that made you feel close to each other, like people who hear a dirge from home in a foreign country.

You want to embrace Nastya, but at the same moment a burning pain sears through you; a pain that quickly expands into one

great firestorm and spreads throughout your entire body. Reflexively, you close your eyes.

You see yourself walking through a house, looking for something you no longer remember. Suddenly the air trembles. A tremendous bang goes right through you, the sound wave throws you to the ground. It seems to you that your right arm has burst into flames.

You want to smother the fire, but you cannot move. The burning pain is getting stronger, it sets your whole body on fire. You hear yourself scream, but the scream stifles in your throat. A moment later, everything around you turns black.

When you regain consciousness, you are lying in a field hospital. The memory seeps back into your mind drop by drop, only very slowly do you dive back into the scenery that has separated your past from your future. At the same moment, the burning pain sears through your arm again. You feel for it, but you reach into the void – your right arm is no longer there.

It costs you a great deal of effort to open your eyes again. It feels as if the world were covered by a curtain of lead that you cannot lift, no matter how hard you try.

Blinking, you look into your shattered world – and sink into the abyss of Nastya's half-open eyes. You want to crawl into them like a wounded animal – but from the depths of her abyss the same cries reach your ear that drive you out of yourself. So your lips touch only fleetingly, like people whose bodies brush against each other in a pedestrian zone.

Motionless, you remain sitting on the bench, close to each other and yet infinitely far apart. Locked within the walls of your grief, the path to another life remains blocked for you.



Pictures: 1. Mona El Falaky: Head of an angel sculpture (Pixabay; coloured in the original); 2. Rainhard Wiesinger: Statue of an angel (Pixabay; detail)

A key feature of Kremlin propaganda is its cynicism. This includes satirising human rights instead of respecting them, as in the referenda on the annexation of the occupied territories.



Heteronomous Self-Determination

They break down your door.
They break down your house.
They break your bones.
They break your existence.

They rape your wife.
They rape your daughter.
They rape your mother.
They rape your soul.

They ravage your home.
They ravage your town.

They ravage your country.
They ravage your life.

They steal what they have not ravaged.
They steal your trust in peace.
They steal your peace of mind.
They steal your freedom.

Whoever opposes them is a terrorist for them.
Whoever criticises them is an enemy of the people.
Whoever calls them destroyers, thieves, rapists,
denies the reality of their benevolent crimes.

Then they hold a gun to your head
and ask you:
"Would you like to be part of this glorious gang
that performs such triumphant deeds?"

Now you have the choice:
the choice between an immediate death
and a slow agony, a fading away
of everything you are:

of your language, your culture,
your identity, your dignity.
And such a choice they call:
"Self-determination!"

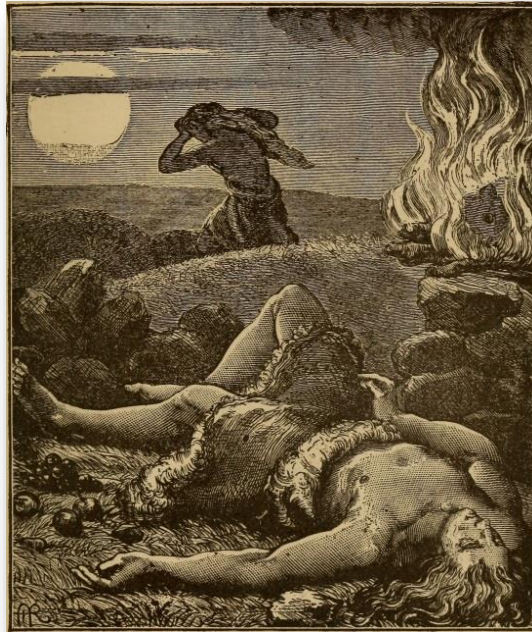
Picture: Koon Boh Goh: Stairs (Pixabay; colour modified)

Aftermath



Adrian Hill (1895 – 1977): Ruins Between Bernafay Wood and Maricourt (1918); London, Imperial War Museums (Wikimedia Commons)

Does a psychopath have a conscience? And if so, how does he react when it stirs?



The Insubordinate Voice

In the middle of the night someone knocks on your bedroom door. How is that possible, you think, since when is it allowed to get the Tsar out of bed at night?

Annoyed, you roll over to the other side, determined to ignore the knock. But it just won't stop. All right, you say to yourself, it's probably something important after all. Maybe the palace is on fire.

Drowsy, you stagger to the door. You open it – and look at a truly ridiculous figure. It wears a floor-length, dark red robe, the face is

completely covered by a veil, the head is adorned with an old-fashioned hood, similar to the cardinals' hats. In the right hand of the figure a wooden staff with a golden ball at each end is hovering.

"What the hell are you doing here?" you start grumbling. "Don't you know that ..."

But the figure doesn't let you finish. Without paying attention to your words, it announces: "Vladimir Vladimirovich, I charge you with the murder and attempted murder of your brothers and sisters!"

"Excuse me?" you ask indignantly. "Is this some kind of joke? How dare you disturb me in the middle of the night for just ...?"

But by then the figure has already vanished into thin air. You step out into the corridor, look to the left, look to the right – but there is nothing to be seen.

Strange, you think, someone must be playing a dirty trick on you. But who? After all, you deliberately transferred the murders of your brothers and sisters to the cellar! So no one in your own palace can have noticed anything about it. Does that mean that you owe the prank to one of the neighbouring palaces? But why should they care what you're doing in your cellar? That's none of their business at all!

Outraged, you go back to sleep. Your heart still beats the drum of rage for a while, but then you finally drift back into the realm of dreams. The day was exhausting, you are simply too tired to dwell on such trivialities.

But no sooner are you fast asleep than there's another knock at your door. That's enough, you think, that's true *lèse-majesté* now!

So you decide to solve the problem in your own way. Determined, you pick up the rifle that is always within reach next to your bed.

As you pull open the door, the ridiculous figure in the red robe is indeed standing there again. "Vladimir Vladimirovich," it begins once more, "I charge you with the murder ..."

This time you don't wait for the torrent of words to end. Instead, you answer with a volley from your automatic rifle that would have taken down a whole army of ridiculous figures.

Well done, you growl grimly, now it's quiet at last. True, you are surprised that the strange figure seems to have vanished into thin air again. But this time you slammed the door shut again immediately – maybe you just didn't see it fall down.

Time to sleep at last, you think, curling up with relish under your bearskin blanket. It is not long before slumber embraces you again. Gun salvos have always had an extremely calming effect on you, almost like a lullaby from childhood.

But unfortunately, this time it's no different than before: as soon as your dreams carry you away into the wonderful expanses of your new empire, the knocking snaps you out of your sleep again.

You pull the blanket over your head, you cover your ears – but it's all in vain. This time the solemn chant of the voice can be heard even before you rise from your bed: "Vladimir Vladimirovich," it begins again, "I charge you with the murder and attempted murder of your brothers and sisters!"

Furious, you jump out of bed, reach for your rifle, go to the door, pull it open – but there is no one around. Yet you continue to hear the voice: "Vladimir Vladimirovich, I charge you with murder and attempted murder, Vladimir Vladimirovich, murder and attempted murder, you do not escape me, I charge you ..."

Panic seizes you. You move a cupboard in front of the door, stuff plugs into your ears, pull the blanket even tighter over your head – to no avail! The voice is everywhere, it penetrates every material, it echoes from everywhere. It feels as if it were pulsating with your blood inside you.

All right, you think, sighing, then I'll do without sleep – I've got far too much to do anyway.

Disgruntled, you descend into the cellar. A few brothers and sisters are still left there, maybe you can vent your anger on them. Possibly you can even drown out that annoying voice with their screams.

Picture: The Murder of Abel; from: Richmond, E. J.: True stories for little people (1894; Library of Congress / Wikimedia Commons)

A spree killer kills everything that gets in his way. Fearing that he might turn his weapons on you, too, you just let it happen. But what if he interprets your behaviour as weakness? Won't he then attack you all the more?



The Threat

One day, after the Tsar had finished his military campaign in the East, he stood at your door. Now you are standing face to face with each other.

"I feel threatened by you," the Tsar complains with a pitiful look in his eyes. "You must abolish your military."

You gaze in surprise at the unexpected visitor. "But Mr. Tsar," you try to reassure him, "our military is not directed against you at all

– it doesn't threaten anyone. It is only there for our safety. So that we can defend ourselves if we are attacked."

The Tsar continues to look at you contritely. "Well, in any case, all those weapons – it's just too dangerous! What if a shot gets off accidentally? That could set the whole world on fire! Honestly – it even causes me nightmares."

You look inquiringly into his face. Does he really feel threatened by you – despite his well-armed forces? Or is he only acting this way to weaken you? On the other hand, what does it matter? You've only just seen what can happen when the Tsar talks about feeling threatened.

So you speak in a deliberately cautious manner to the unpredictable visitor. "We could cooperate," you suggest to him. "Introduce confidence-building measures, just like we used to do in the past."

The Tsar shakes his head disapprovingly. "No, I'm sorry, that's not enough for me. Who can guarantee me that you will abide by the rules on which we agree in the process?"

Here's someone speaking from experience, you think. But of course you are careful enough not to say so openly. After all, you are interested in a peaceful solution. "You really don't have to worry about that, Mr. Tsar," you appease him. "Or have we ever given you cause to doubt our word in the past?"

Your counterpart laughs sarcastically. "Indeed!" he exclaims. "It was you, after all, who smashed my beautiful great empire with your endless talk of freedom! As a result, you actually succeeded in making my people feel imprisoned in the vast expanses of their

country. And today you are again putting nonsense into their heads!"

Well, you think – was this imprisonment really just a feeling? But of course you know that this is not the time for ideological discussions. "I assure you, my dear Mr. Tsar," you therefore emphasise, "that it is far from us to influence any of your subjects in any way. After all, it is our firm belief that everyone should find his own way to happiness."

The Tsar grimaces mockingly. "You see," he snarls triumphantly, "that is precisely what your problem is – that you think everyone must decide for themselves about their lives! How do you expect to master the enormous challenges today's world population is facing this way? For that, the decision-making power has to be concentrated in one hand!"

This time you dare to contradict the noble visitor. "Are you really sure about that, dear Mr. Tsar? Don't you think that in the end the wisdom of the many can achieve more than the head of a single person?"

The Tsar's eyes twitch imperceptibly. You feel your heart beating against your ribcage as if it wanted to flee from your body. Have you made yourself guilty of an insult to His Majesty?

But when you now look the mighty ruler in the face again, he seems rather bored. "Maybe that's how it would end up," he concedes magnanimously. "It's just that you will never reach that end. Some want to go in this direction, others in that direction, again others in a completely different direction – by the time you're done with your discussions, the world will have long since come to an end!"

End of the world ... You'd rather associated this with what the Tsar brought about during his last military campaign. This time, however, you pull yourself together and ask cautiously: "Be it as it may, I honestly don't understand what this has to do with our military."

"You really don't get it?" The Tsar glares at you disdainfully. "But the connection is obvious! It is not your military itself that threatens me – but what it defends."

However disgruntled your visitor seems, you can't let that go unchallenged. "Doesn't every country," you object, "have the right to defend its people's way of life? Doesn't your military also serve that purpose?"

At that point, the Tsar suddenly becomes statesmanlike. "My dear neighbour," he rebukes you, "I must tell you: this selfishness is simply no longer in keeping with the times. But that is exactly what is typical of you and the way of life you want to defend – this individualism that has led to a decay of all morals. And it is precisely this decline in morals that has brought the world to the edge of destruction. What we need today is discipline and order, clear rules of conduct, supervised and enforced by a universally recognised authority. Otherwise we will gamble away the future of our children!"

Welcome back to the Führer state, you think – but prefer to keep your thoughts to yourself. The Tsar's eyes are already twitching ominously again.

"People want to live in freedom," you argue in an emphatically calm voice. "So isn't it also a kind of downfall if in the future we can all only move like robots on predetermined tracks?"

This time the Tsar just glares at you superiorly. Apparently he has no desire for further discussion. "Very well," he ends the conversation. "I see that my request is falling on deaf ears here. Then we will just have to solve the problem in another way."

When the Tsar has gone, you are left with a queasy feeling that gradually grows into outright nausea. Is this the fear of the blatant threat? Or does your nausea have purely physical causes? Has the Tsar ended up spraying one of his notorious invisible poisons in your flat?

Come on, you think, now I'm getting paranoid myself! But then suddenly your smartphone buzzes.

"Are you online?" a friend wants to know. "No? Then have a look at the social media – no matter which one."

Probably the discussions have already begun, you think: that you were too undiplomatic and should be more accommodating towards the Tsar. But as you dive into the sea of the media, completely different waves crash over you.

No matter what you click on, everywhere the same images are burnt into your eyes. Each image is like a distorting mirror. Because all the pictures show yourself: from the front, from behind, from the side.

That alone would be nothing unusual. You are a public figure, there are countless pictures of you on the net. But these pictures show you naked, and above all: in an unambiguously ambiguous pose, making love to little boys.

Even before you can come to your senses, the doorbell rings. Just a moment more, and the storm tide of publicity will burst into

your life, burying you and everything you ever cared about under its waves.

Even if you succeed in unmasking the deepfake as such – there is no way for you to survive this tsunami. It will be your downfall.

This will be the first stage victory of the Tsar.

Picture: Peter Ludwigs (1888 – 1943): The War (1937); Museum Kunstpalast (Art Palace) Düsseldorf (Wikimedia Commons)

The war against Ukraine is turning the world community's existing order of values upside down.



Upside Down World

1. If you do not help a footsore to his feet, it is a failure to provide assistance. If a whole nation is slaughtered next to you, you only have to come to the people's rescue if they have first concluded a formal contract of mutual assistance with you.
2. If you demand money for the end of a kidnapping, this is called "extortion". If you threaten others with armed force in case a victim you are torturing is helped, it is called "tactical skill".
3. If you kill a single person in a planned way, this is called "murder". If you wipe out an entire people, it is considered a "cleansing operation".
4. If you set your neighbour's house on fire, it's a crime. If you burn down a whole town, it's a strategic masterstroke.

5. If you loot a supermarket, it's a raid. If you take a whole country as loot, it's a conquest. For a raid you get a place in prison, for a conquest a place in the history books.
6. If you take hostages to enforce your demands, it's coercion. If you shoot your hostages immediately, it's a show of force. The hostage taker is shot by the police. Before the hostage killer, whole armies will retreat.
7. Human rights are only of local importance. They are a luxury good to which only those who can afford it are entitled.
8. The right to bodily integrity applies only to those who are strong enough to assert it against others.
9. Only those who are prepared to violate the right of others to bodily integrity, if necessary, can preserve their own right to bodily integrity.
10. Disarmament conferences serve to prepare for the next war in peace.
11. Understanding among nations means: understanding among the larger nations about the distribution of the smaller nations, as their natural prey.
12. Confidence-building measures are a lullaby. Anyone whose eyes fall shut during this will be killed in his sleep.

Picture: Lutz6078: Headstand (Pixabay; modified)