

War in Ukraine and the Ethics of Pragmatism

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In the run up to his first presidential campaign, Putin sat down with journalists and, eager to dispel doubts about his KGB past, vigorously defended his democratic credentials. “I am not a dictator,” he told the interviewers. “We are part of western European culture.” Ours is “the path of democratic development.” “We must preserve local government and a system of election for governors;” “the confiscation and nationalization of property” would be “catastrophic” (Putin, 2000: 155-156, 163-174; cf. Shalin, 2007).

While hesitating to label his overall stance, Putin singled out for praise Ludwig Erhard, the German Chancellor, as “a very pragmatic man” whose savvy political stewardship helped navigate West Germany after World War II (Putin, 2000, 175). The adjective “pragmatic” pops up several times in this compilation of interviews and hagiographic testimonies, applied among others to Anatoly Chubais, who had pleasantly surprised Putin by endorsing his decision to subdue the rebellion in Chechnya. The compendium compiled during the 2000 election season also contains a quote from Sergei Raldugin, Putin’s longtime friend, who noticed, not without trepidation, his companion’s mutation into a veritable “pragmatist” (Putin, 2000, 91).

In 2013, the Russia leader gave an interview on the eve of the G20 summit where he embraced the moniker. “I am a conservative pragmatist,” Putin (2013) assured foreign journalists who pondered his political sensibilities ever since the second Russian president assumed the reins of government. The expression “Putin’s pragmatism” and its iterations turn up frequently in the news media, expert reports, and scholarly accounts (Caryl, 2001; Lozansky, 2013; Boykoff and Smith-Spark, 2017; Pertsev, 2017; Crosston, 2018; Baker, 2019; Rogov, 2022). Early comments were generally positive, as observers praised Putin’s decision to close military bases in Cuba and Vietnam, tacit approval of U.S. bases in Central Asia, and willingness to engage in talks about troop reduction in Europe. Commentators warned that “A pragmatic, cool-headed policy oriented toward Russia’s interests

(including Russia's interest in a robust market economy) will present a far greater challenge to the West than Yeltsin's emotional oscillations between friendship and confrontation" (Sokov, 2000). "Russia's stated adherence to the values of democracy has little to do with her liberal idealism of the early 1990s, but rather is a pragmatic approach in which accepting dominant Western norms has a long-term strategic value, a means of advancing the national interest" (Medvedev, 2004). Cautious optimism about the direction of Russian foreign policy was palpable: "Russia would pursue its 'national interest' wherever it sees fit—but without the interference of 'ideology,' which, as Putin argues, regrettably complicated Soviet foreign policy" (Caryl, 2001). "Putin's clear-eyed pragmatism and his visceral support of George W. Bush's war on terrorism," explained Lilia Shevtsova (2005), "have given Russia otherwise unattainable international significance."

Inside Russia, the foreign policy establishment echoed Putin's call for pragmatism. Sergey Lavrov (2007) defended his country's increasingly assertive foreign policy: "We hear complaints about the lack of ideology which our foreign policy supposedly demonstrates. Yet, pragmatism does not signify the lack of principles. What it means is that we proceed from the real needs of our country and its citizens. Russia has settled on the ideology of common sense." "It is high time for U.S. policy toward Russia to change drastically in the spirit of pragmatism," urged Edward Lozansky (2013), President of the American University in Moscow. "Not only have all the 'color revolutions' failed, but America is currently in retreat almost on every front." President Dmitry Medvedev weighed in on the issue. *The New York Times* (Levy, 2008) prominently featured the friendly advice he gave to Americans: "I am sure that any administration of the United States of America, if it wishes to succeed, among other things, in overcoming essentially a depression that exists in the American economic market, must conduct a pragmatic policy inside the country and abroad."

The speech that Vladimir Putin delivered on February 10, 2007 at the Munich Security Conference raised some eyebrows, but his warning against NATO expansion toward Russia's borders went unheeded until the next year when Russia launched "a peace enforcement operation" in Georgia, featuring a full-blown land and air assault on the neighboring country. Facing few repercussions, Putin moved in 2014 to annex Crimea and spearheaded the separatist movement in the Donetsk and Lugansk regions. That is when pundits began to raise questions about Putin's pragmatist credentials, observing that "the regime gradually shifted from pragmatism to spirituality," with the president establishing himself as "a moral or national leader" (Pertsev, 2017).

On February 24, 2022, Russia launched a “special military operation” in Ukraine, at which point the Putin-the-pragmatist meme was replaced with the Putin-the-ideologue mantra. Now commentators painted Putin as a leader determined to defend traditional values and carry out “an existential war between the Russian civilization and the West” (Kolesnikov, 2022). Critics slammed the Russian president’s indifference to means and disregard for principles that the popular imagination has long associated with pragmatism. Some decried “President Vladimir Putin a ruthless but pragmatic autocrat” who wreaked havoc on the world order (Zubok, 2022). Others maintained that “The ongoing war in Ukraine, however, contradicts any notion of Russian ‘pragmatism’” (Casula, 2022). Still others blamed the West for its “cynical pragmatism” that allows the carnage in Ukraine to go unabated: “What looks like pragmatism from the Western point of view seems like cynicism to Ukrainians [who are] bleeding to death for the sake of exhausting Putin” (Shenderovich, 2023).

Pragmatism has been getting bad press in Russia for a long time. Liberal thinkers are especially incensed with pragmatism, which rarely appears in their discourse without the adjectives “crass,” “cynical,” “naked,” “cold,” “wicked,” or “devoid of principles.” This is quite understandable given the official pronouncements on the subject, like the one put forward by Kirill, Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church:

The politics of cooperation between the East and West was based on naked PRAGMATISM, on the hard bargain and balance of interests. Which is why nobody ever believed that the idea of human rights and freedoms would be realized ... Soviet diplomacy, when joining the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights, never meant to extend the reach of this document to the Soviet Union. It was also a political ruse [*blef*] when in 1975 we signed the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (Kirill, 2006).

Applied to the Ukrainian crisis, this attitude translates into the proposition articulated by the RIAC fellow in a post titled “A pragmatic approach to peace in Ukraine”—“Thus, the only solution for peace in Ukraine is for Ukraine to take a humble look at the situation, to accept its position in world politics, and to stop provoking the country it perceives to be a threat, expecting the West to bail them out” (Fors, 2021).

For critics incensed with such noxious dicta, pragmatism was indeed “just a polite name for the lack of principles” (Bukovsky, 2006), “a cover for cynicism, hypocrisy, and corruption” (Navalnaya, 2021), “the abject form of slavery, all the more pernicious since choosing between shame

and humiliation, man ends up with shame and humiliation at the same time” (Bykov, 2021). Something was missing in such wholesale rejection of pragmatism, however. This image had little to do with the intellectual current that sprang to life in the second half of the nineteenth century and evolved into an influential political and philosophical movement in the United States.

Note that Russian disdain for pragmatism is not unique—it was widespread in twentieth century Europe, where academics and public intellectuals gave a cold shoulder to the philosophical pragmatism of William James, John Dewey, George Herbert Mead, and Jane Addams, who spread the gospel of collective inquiry deployed in the service of free society and democratic culture. For the intellectuals “bred in the veneration of theory and history, and contempt for empiricism and pragmatism” (Neumann, 1953, 19; cf. Shalin, 1992, 2010), the American project signified little more than crass materialism and utilitarian cunning. The reactions of Max Scheler and Martin Heidegger exemplified this attitude. In his “Letter on Humanism,” Heidegger ([1946] 1961, 231, 200) condemned “the blindness and arbitrariness of what is ... known under the heading of ‘pragmatism,’ a species of the intellectual malaise called “humanism” whose proponents equate thinking with the “*l'engagement dans l'action*” (Heidegger [1946] 1961, 194, 197). The pragmatist stance, Heidegger contended, breeds the “peculiar dictatorship of the public realm.” Only a solitary thinker impartially contemplating the “Being of beings” can escape the impersonal domain of *Das Man* suffocating humanity.

Frankfurt school thinkers fit well with this tradition. Belittling its emancipatory rhetoric, Marcuse ([1939] 1940) and Horkheimer (1937, 1947) dismissed pragmatism as “the abasement of reason,” “a genuine expression of the positivistic approach,” the “reduction of reason to a mere instrument,” a philosophical “counterpart of modern industrialism, for which the factory is the prototype of human existence, and which models all branches of culture after production on the conveyor belt, or after the rationalized front office” (Horkheimer, 1947, 45–54). Such contempt for pragmatism hardly abated after the authors of *Dialectics of Enlightenment* escaped Nazi Germany and settled in America.

It fell to the younger generation of Frankfurt theorists to rediscover American pragmatism and take its democratic ethos seriously. Following World War II, they undertook a systematic reexamination of the German tradition that privileged pure reason and flirted with authoritarianism. John Dewey’s writings alerted Jürgen Habermas to the continuity between scientific inquiry and democratic politics, to the fact that “freedom of inquiry, toleration of diverse views, freedom of communication, the distribution of what is found out to every individual as the ultimate

intellectual consumer, are involved in the democratic as in the scientific method” (Dewey, 1939, 102). Having pondered Dewey and Mead, German intellectuals came to appreciate the role of collective inquiry into communal affairs (Apel, 1981; Habermas, 1984, 1987; Joas, 1985). The problem, as Habermas (1986, 98) identified it, was that “the old Frankfurt School never took bourgeois democracy very seriously.” It failed to acknowledge that the academic freedom which bourgeois democracy fosters is a major historical accomplishment. Habermas and his colleagues understood Dewey’s reverence for democracy which “rests upon persuasion, upon ability to convince and be convinced,” upon “the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion. That is the problem of the public” (Dewey, 1916, 134, 1939, 102).

Few signs point to a pragmatist awakening in Russia, although several critics have taken a more sympathetic approach to pragmatist epistemology and its political agenda (Etkind, 2001; Zhirina, Nazarenko and Nigai, 2006; Shalin, 2017). Here is a statement by a Russian born historian who found his way to the West and urged his countrymen to take a closer look at this movement:

Pragmatism is the only philosophy, American in its origin, that did not compromise itself by its collaboration with some of the worst political regimes of the twentieth century. Such collaborations had bitter consequences and marred quite a few careers of thinkers subscribing to Marxism, phenomenology, and deconstruction. These and similar intellectual currents do not acknowledge practical significance of thought, textual creations, even philosophy itself—in other words, they disclaim the responsibility for intellectual activity as such. Pragmatism, by contrast, focuses not on the truth value of a proposition but on the practical consequences of what is held to be true. That’s to say, pragmatism considers the text and its author responsible for the consequences of reading.

(Etkind, 2001)

I find the spectacle of the Russian establishment wrapping itself in the mantle of pragmatism nauseating. Equally disconcerting is the promiscuous use of concepts like “patriotism,” “sovereignty,” “humanitarian mission,” “denazification campaign,” “special military operation,” and “the Russian World.” Such staples of the official discourse clearly do not pass the pragmatic test. The regime opponents, in turn, struggle to achieve clarity when they deliberate on whether to leave the country or stay put, collaborate with the regime or defy the authorities, settle for a reasonable compromise or hide till the storm passes and

it is safe to venture one's opinions again. The questions of personal responsibility, collective guilt, and national trauma haunt the regime's opponents.

I cannot do justice to such thorny matters in the few pages allotted to this chapter. What follows are sundry reflections of someone who studied pragmatism for a long time and sought to follow its ethical guidelines. No final answers or formulas are propounded below, just a few thoughts for the perplexed, including myself, in the spirit of philosophical pragmatism and with the hope to further the discussion.

Applying the Pragmatic Test

The pragmatist eschews concepts loosely connected to the mundane world. This is crucial when we deal with the arid abstractions and vapid generalities inundating politics where audiences are exposed to lofty words whose meaning and practical consequences are kept deliberately obscure. Take the “patriotism” that war mongers invoke to excuse the invasion of Ukraine. This term, endlessly bandied around, is wrought with contradictory connotations. The mob carrying out a pogrom and shouting nationalistic slogans sees itself as patriotic, and so does a couple offering safe harbor to their Jewish neighbors fleeing the hyperpatriotic crowd. A battlefield commander sending soldiers to clear the minefield with their bodies justifies his orders by the need to defend the homeland; the soldier volunteering to stay behind to ensure the safe retreat of his comrades shows love for his countrymen too. Patriotism as “the last refuge of scoundrel” (Dr. Samuel Johnson), the kind a corrupt official caught with his hands in the public trough likes to invoke (Saltykov-Shchedrin), has nothing in common with the patriotism of Aleksey Navalny unmasking corruption among Putin's cronies and receiving a twenty-year jail sentence for his public service. Take any other term exploited by the Moscow propaganda machine—traditional values, patrial mobilization, denazification campaign—and you run into the same problem. Kept deliberately vague, such expressions leave ample room for the authorities to suffuse them with whatever sense the situation demands. What could be more traditional than the seventeenth century Russian codex of family life advising parents “to flog the child mercilessly” to ensure its affection and admonishing wives “to live in fear and obey scrupulously their husbands” (Domostroi, 2007, 159, 237)—are these the traditional family values the authorities plan to enforce? Part belongs to a whole, as in “partial mobilization,” but with twenty-four million eligible men, we are left to wonder how many might be drafted. So, when we hear Z-patriots defend “the Russian world,” we must not let them

get away with obfuscation and demand to know how far the borders of this world stretch and what objectives the special military operation strives to attain. The Russian World hinges on the propaganda of national superiority and the right to meddle into affairs of the countries where Russian language speakers are allegedly mistreated. Was not German Nazism based on a similar claim regarding German nationals? That is what Peirce's pragmatic test calls for when it directs attention to the consequences of our significations—"the ultimate meaning of any sign consists either of ... feeling or of acting or being acted upon" (Peirce, 1931–1935, vol. 5: 7).

Navigating the World-in-the-Making

Rendering meaning clear is not the sole purpose of pragmatist inquiry. The world we inhabit is in flux—it is a “blooming, buzzing confusion,” as William James put it (James, 1890, 462). The logic commensurate with this world does not take for granted its foundational principles of identity, non-contradiction, and the excluded middle (*tertium non datur*). It emphasizes the ethical dimension of logical thinking insofar as it helps people entering a universe of discourse to get on the same page, live up to their definitional commitments, acknowledge the contradictions, and follow through on their claims to an identity. The uncertainty embedded in this world can never be completely expunged. Indeterminacy endemic to the human condition stems not from the paucity of terms but from their overabundance (Shalin, 1986). As a rule, we can terminate indeterminacy in more than one way by recourse to competing terminological devices. Whatever the choice, we must acknowledge alternative terminologies and accept the responsibility for elevating some accounting frames over others. Such frames do more than reflect the world out there—they bring it into existence as a meaningful whole. “For rationalism reality is ready-made and complete from all eternity while for pragmatism it is still in the making” (James, [1907] 1955, 167). This world-in-the-making is not a private conceit; it is a collective accomplishment subject to challenges and revisions, which grow violent at times. The question is who controls the terminological means of production which enable us to tame chaos, to transform the world of flux into objective and meaningful reality. In a democratic society, such control is widely dispersed; everybody can raise a truth claim; terminological practices are open to criticism in light of their consequences and in line with the majority's notion of public good. In an authoritarian polity, the authorities limit the range of terminological practices and the scope of legitimate criticism, presiding over a semi-ordered

chaos they take to be eternal and natural. Bringing to light the obscene riches Putin's cronies acquired through their control over national oil resources could land the critic in jail, publicly expressing doubts about the legality of the military operation and annexation of foreign territories will earn you the label "foreign agent," and aiding the Ukrainians devastated by the war is to court the charge of high treason. Wrestling over control of the terms of public discourse and ensuring freedom of communication is a pragmatic imperative.

Aligning Knowledge and Experience

Viewed from this vantage point, democracy is a historically specific mode of managing uncertainty that spurns the monopoly over truth claims and leaves no area of life exempt from public scrutiny. We join "the community of inquirers" (Peirce) as participant observers demanding accountability for actions taken on its behalf. Such an inquiry does not discard truth as a public good, only its rationalistic version predicated on "comparing ready-made ideas with ready-made facts." The rationalist approach is supplanted with the pragmatist insight that "both idea and facts are flexible, and verification is the process of mutual adjustment, of organic interaction" (Dewey, [1890] 1969, 87). We mold things into objects to make them fit our hypothetical constructs and revise our theories to align them with practice. As citizens, we engage in social reconstruction aiming to build the world that stands to reason, acknowledging in the process the limits of our power and, when necessary, the failure of our efforts. Truth is understood here not as the sure grasp of things themselves, nor as the intellectual revelations transcending experience, but as a historically specific, practically accomplished, collectively sustained, and continuously revised alignment between knowledge and practice. Terminating practices play a crucial role in the historical process of worldly truth making. As we terminate indeterminacy, we come to grips with the fact that "to terminate" simultaneously means "to put an end to" and "to frame in specific terms," "to narrow the potentialities of being" and "to render things into meaningful objects." As we open some hermeneutical horizons, we obscure other ways of making the world into an objective and meaningful whole. If the thing-in-itself is an object wrenched from its historical reference frame and treated as fact that speaks for itself, then the object is a thing-in-itself framed in contingent terms and backed up by requisite practice. The world we constitute is informed by our ideals and transformed by our undertakings, yet this is not the postmodern world where anything goes,

where truth is an adjunct to power. (There is a reason Putin is called “Russia’s first postmodern president” [Caryl, 2001].) Ours is an obdurate world which compels us to take note and change course when the actions staked on the truth of our propositions fail to bring anticipated consequences.

Enlivening Reason with Emotions

Those who charge pragmatism with being Machiavellian miss the mark. The juxtaposition of cold reason and destructive emotions is inimical to the pragmatist imagination. Affect is present in all ideas, as Spinoza noted centuries ago, and when we try to suppress emotions and escape into the rarified domain of pure reason, we pay a heavy price. “Rationality, once more is not a force to evoke against impulse and habit. It is the attainment of a working harmony among diverse desires. ‘Reason’ as a noun signifies a happy cooperation of a multitude of dispositions, such as sympathy, curiosity, cooperation, exploration, experimentation, frankness, pursuit—to follow things through—circumspection, to look about at the context, etc., etc.” (Dewey, [1922] 1950, 195–196; cf. Shalin, 1992). Pragmatists are not oblivious to the fact that private interests and crude emotions can distort reasoning. The question they raise is how intelligent our emotions are and what we can do to keep our intellect sane. To quote from Dewey again, “the conclusion is not that the emotional, passionate phase of action can be or should be eliminated in behalf of a bloodless reason. More ‘passions,’ not fewer, is the answer” (Dewey, [1922] 1950, 195). That is, if we are passionate about the right things and keep our eyes on the public good. Putin’s oscillation between cold cunning and violently lashing out illustrates the point. It is hard to say whether Putin-the-calculator plotting to kill his opponents is better than Putin-the-macho rousing his nation on the eve of the Russian invasion. Both mark a man who is emotionally hobbled, and perhaps deranged. There are inspiring examples of emotional intelligence among Russian nationals—of moral fortitude in the face of unfolding catastrophe—but the emotional littering that has enveloped the nation is suffocating. It is not just the intelligentsia that is becoming extinct; it is emotional intelligence itself (*intelligentnost*) which Chekhov ([1882] 1912, 238) saw as binding for those who follow the intelligentsia creed, i.e., who “respect human personhood, are quick to forgive, show soft touch, are polite to everyone and ready to yield.” Cruelty—intellectual, emotional, physical—is on a continuum. Scurrility pervading public discourse distorts our reasoning and breeds the violence

that leads to Bucha and Irpin. All sides of the political divide should bear in mind that reason unenlivened by humane sentiments is a ticking bomb waiting to explode.

Balancing Ends and Means

Much ink has been spilled in defense of the proposition that pragmatism lacks principles, that its adherents cynically spurn values and resort to expedient means to achieve their self-serving goals. This is a spurious charge. Popular opinion confuses opportunism with pragmatism, the former common among politicians who resort to expedience and triangulation to stay afloat at all costs, the latter practiced by those who stay true to values, acknowledge a lesser good sacrificed to the larger one, and allow experience to test their assumptions and cherished theories. John Dewey, one of the movement's founders and indefatigable defenders, condemned Stalin's crimes and spearheaded the committee investigating Leon Trotsky's murder. George Herbert Mead marched with demonstrators supporting women suffrage, mediated the garment workers' strike, and led the progressive education drive to aid Chicago immigrants. Jane Addams counted herself among "men and women longing to socialize their democracy" and displayed the "passion for the equalization of human joys and opportunities" which earned her the Nobel Peace Prize (Addams, 1902, 139; 1910, 116, cf. Shalin, 1986). There was nothing cynical about the public engagements of these intellectuals steeped in the Protestant spirit of dissent. Avowed goals, pragmatists insist, are encoded in our means rather than declarations about our noble intentions. So, it is not so much *zelepoploganie* as *sredstvoprimerenie* that should concern us if we follow Dostoyevsky's tale of Great Inquisitor. Given that we commonly choose and adjust our objectives to fit available resources, it is incumbent on us to be upfront about the evolution of our rationales and their potentially self-serving implications. A glossary of suitable motives deployed at the right time will not fill the gap between words, deeds, and emotions working at cross-purpose. Recall how Putin moved the goalposts to explain the special military operation in Ukraine, which he identified at various points as the demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine, putting its leaders on trial, defending the Russian-speaking population, removing biolaboratories producing chemical weapons, securing the borders of the Donetsk and Luhansk breakaway regions, preempting the imminent invasion of Russia by Ukraine, fighting back the NATO attack designed

to dismantle the Russian Federation. Never did Putin clarify the means he was ready to deploy to achieve these shifting goals—will he stop at sending regular troops into battle, recruiting volunteer contract soldiers, mobilizing the draft-age population, destroying Ukraine's infrastructure, dropping an A-bomb on the "fraternal people" of Ukraine? His angry displays only underscore the discontinuities in his self-production and mendacity of his declarations and promises. He sues for peace and is open to negotiations, the Russian president tells journalists. What he means is, "Lay down your arms, surrender to the victor's mercy, give up plans to join NATO, and accept the Russian protectorate—only then you may have peace." It is anybody's guess what devious means Putin still has up his sleeves, his somatic-affective indicia and depraved actions defying his peaceful declarations.

Repairing the Word-Body-Action Nexus

The principled pragmatism driving this historical project is based on the premise that we disclose our values discursively, affectively, and interactionally, that the word-body-action nexus is bound to get out of whack, and that constantly realigning our verbal-discursive, somatic-affective, and behavioral-performative practices is the mark of ethical agency. Whatever ethical stance we take, it falls short if we fail to align our verbal stance with practical deeds, if our emotions contradict our verbal posture, if our behavioral commitments stray from professed goals. Denouncing dominant values while acquiescing to the status quo is what distinguishes the cynical attitude. The ancient cynics adopted lifestyles inimical to the established norms and reveled in derisive discourse. Irony, parody, and travesty go a long way to expose the reigning hypocrisy, as Russian sots-artists demonstrated, yet deconstructive engagement takes you only so far. If your goal is "pragmatic reconstruction," as Dewey ([1920] 1950; cf. Shalin 2022) urged, cynicism will not suffice. You need to sign yourself in the flesh, to body forth your convictions, which forces you to take a public stance, to articulate what you take to be public good—market economy, limited government, free speech, personal autonomy, public education, universal healthcare, gender and marriage equality, and so on. People will clash about the centrality of this or that public good, but the democratic ethos demands a robust debate about such matters undistorted by the fear of reprisals and thoughts of personal gain. Such are the communication-specific conditions of possibility for an emotionally

intelligent democracy—conditions that are missing in today’s Russia, mired in the cycle of violence and soul-crushing fear and hopelessness (Shalin, 2018, 2019).

Practicing Civic Imagination

Among our many selves, we single out some that go to the core of our identity, which we embrace as “the real me.” This is especially common among individuals and groups fighting a stigma imposed on them by society. Nothing is more important for the afflicted than to make others acknowledge their grievances and show deference. Pushed too far, such identity politics stifle civic imagination and breed political myopias (Shalin, 2021). The urge to band together morphs into a desire to keep aliens at bay, to gather all of us in and push foreigners out. No matter where we draw the line, however, some of “us” will be caught on the other side, and some of “them” will be found in our midst, and it is only a matter of time before we discover that our politically identical twins spawn selves we cannot embrace. Your comrades may dislike your gender politics, sexual orientation, position on reproductive rights, or resent the fact that you made more sound life choices. What drives Russian ultra-patriots mad is not just that Ukrainians speak a different language and refuse peaceful overtures to join the Russian world; it is also the suspicion that they may enjoy freedoms denied to their neighbors. And now that Ukrainians have put up stiff resistance, they are demonized, ridiculed, and subject to inhumane treatment. In the face of this assault on their dignity and livelihood, the Ukrainians are apt to treat all Russians as enemies and potential fascists (Russists) whose cultural signposts must be eradicated from the land of Taras Shevchenko and Lesia Ukrainka. The civic imagination that propels pragmatist ethics counteracts identity politics. It goads us to see that identity is not ingrained in our bodies, that it is the product of our ongoing effort to make sense of the world and our place in it. The search for the excluded middle, *tertium datur*, is an ongoing concern in this pragma centered universe. Our identities, along with the discursive values undergirding them, breed ambivalence—the hallmark of an emotionally intelligent person alive to the contradictions inherent in the human condition. Give the markets free reign, and they will spawn monopolies. Ignore the plight of the downtrodden, and liberty will breed inequality and make a mockery of the call to brotherhood. Allow populists to force their will on the polity, and you can say goodbye to liberty, representative democracy, and constitutional order. The relationship between such competing values

is that of uncertainty—they cannot be maximized simultaneously with an arbitrary precision. “There is the conflict between the old and the new, between the radical and the conservative,” wrote Mead in the spirit of mediation, but “we may not wish to be either radical or conservative. We may wish to comprehend and to do justice to the changing valuations” (Mead, 1938, 480). Letting some of our cherished convictions push aside other principles risks plunging our lives into mayhem. Recognizing the contingent nature of our values distinguishes the ethical life steeped in pragmatism and civic imagination.

Reaching a Reasonable Compromise

Edifying as such considerations might be, they are quite removed from the practical decisions confronting a person trying to figure out how to safeguard their dignity and survive oppression. Nor do they tell us much about the limits of reasonable compromise. We must start by acknowledging that our predicament is not unique, that other epochs confronted the question of how to lead a moral life in an immoral society. Our teachers and mentors faced tough choices in Soviet Russia. Yuri Levada, the Founder of Levada Public Opinion Center, joined the Communist Party and presided over the party organization in the Institute of Sociology before he was forced out (Levada, 2008; Shalin, 2008). Igor Kon, a leading Soviet era sociologist, was commissioned to do research by the Party Central Committee (for which he wrote, among other things, a brief on the scourge of antisemitism) and published in *Kommunist* and other party outlets essays on ethnic prejudice and intelligentsia (Kon, 2011, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c; Kon-Shalin, 2018). Vladimir Yadov, dean of Leningrad sociologists, let go of a few coworkers to save his research team from being disbanded (Yadov 2015; Yadov-Shalin, 2016). Some things these iconic figures said or did make us wince today (Starovoitova, 2007; Levada, 2008; cf. Shalin, 2008; Chudakova 2021). These academics chose to collaborate with the authorities, and in the process nurtured two generations of social scientists and public intellectuals without whom Russian sociology and the *perestroika* reforms would not have been the same.¹ The situation is different today when closeted liberals are increasingly forced to take a stand on the war in Ukraine as a condition of their continued employment and, in some cases, freedom. Will they do more good by compromising with the authorities, or should they attempt a moral-political coming out and publicly condemn the invasion? Chulpan Khamatova lent her name to Putin’s election campaign in exchange for the

state funding of children cancer clinics; after Putin savaged Ukraine, she left the country to underscore her disagreement with the regime and salvage whatever was left of her dignity. For the time being, emigration remains an option for those fed up with Putin's policies and willing to vote with their feet, but the situation might change at any moment. "Germany under the Nazi regime was a prison," wrote Carl Jaspers. "The guilt of getting into it is political guilt. Once the gates were shut, however, a prison break from within was no longer possible ... To hold the inmates of a prison collectively responsible for outrages committed by the prison staff is clearly unjust" (Jaspers, [1946] 2001, 76). Whatever pathway the person charts in this moral minefield, one cannot escape compromises and must be aware of the stones left unturned, the moral cost incurred.

Owing Up to One's Responsibility

The extent to which one bears responsibility for the unfolding tragedy has been debated at length, with no consensus over the matter and much blame to go around. Those responsible for the bloodshed—the nation's leaders, professional propagandists, soldiers committing war crimes—may feel no guilt, but their role in triggering the war and legal liability for the atrocities is beyond doubt. Then, there are the foreign players who coddled the Russian Federation president in the past and continue aiding and abetting Putin's war efforts—all of whom share a measure of responsibility for allowing this tragedy to happen and doing less than they could in helping Ukrainian resistance. It is harder to ascertain the culpability of ordinary citizens, those who shielded themselves from the ugly realities and refused to fight or even acknowledge the evil their country inflicted on the world. Here is the perspective of a man from another era, a philosopher with a wounded conscience and vivid moral imagination:

Are we Germans to be held liable for outrages which Germans inflicted on us, or from which we were saved as by a miracle? Yes—in as much as we let such a regime rise among us. No—insofar as many of us in our deepest hearts opposed all this evil and have no morally guilty acts or inner motivations to admit (Jaspers, [1946] 2001, 55).

Karl Jaspers helped the postwar Germans to come to grips with crimes committed by them and in their name. With admirably pragmatic clarity, he distinguished between *political responsibility*—"We are politically responsible for our regime, for the acts of the regime, for the start of the war in this world-historical situation, and for the kind of leaders we allowed to

rise among us”; *moral guilt*—“Blindness for the misfortune of others, lack of imagination of the heart, inner indifference toward the witnessed evil—that is moral guilt”; *collective guilt*—“You are inferior as a nation, ignoble, criminal, the scum of the earth, different from all other nations [we are told]. This is the collectivist type of thought and appraisal, classifying every individual under these generalizations [which] is radically false and itself inhuman”; and *metaphysical guilt* known only to God.

There exists a solidarity among men as human beings that makes each co-responsible for every wrong and every injustice in the world, especially for crimes committed in his presence or with his knowledge. If I fail to do whatever I can to prevent them, I too am guilty. If I was present at the murder of others without risking my life to prevent it, I feel guilty in a way not adequately conceivable either legally, politically, or morally (Jaspers, [1946] 2001: 26, 44, 55, 63-64, 72).

These distinctions resonate with pragmatists, who struggled to articulate what John Dewey called a “common faith” responsive to the needs of humanity as a whole:

Here are all the elements for a religious faith that shall not be confined to sect, class, or race. Such a faith has always been implicitly the common faith of mankind ... In that way the churches would indeed become catholic. The demand that churches show a more active interest in social affairs, that they take a definite stand upon such questions as war, economic injustice, political corruption, that they stimulate action for a divine kingdom on earth, is one of the signs of the times (Dewey, [1934] 1986: 59, 56).

As imperative as it is to look back and take stock of one’s inaction, it is even more important for pragmatists to ascertain what guilt and repentance mean in practical terms, and how they can shape the future. This is when one starts with oneself.

Choosing a Self in the Time of Crisis

Russian history is teeming with cataclysms that left deep scars on the nation’s psyche. Surviving wars, revolutions, political and ethnic purges was no mean feat for the people of Russia, and it is understandable when they wish to insulate themselves from political headwinds. If you won’t play politics, that does not mean politics will not play with you. Much as we try to live unnoticed

and resist being dragged into the vortex of history, we are forced to take a stance, even if an unspoken one. Actions speak louder than words, somatic indexes point to existential quandaries, and conflicted emotions hint at the broken semiotic chains in the continuing self-production. Thus, Vladimir Putin's autocratic rule flies in the face of his early disavowal of being a dictator. Vladimir Soloviev's hatred toward Ukraine and its people makes mockery of his paeans to religious tolerance. Vladimir Posner's refusal to take a stance on the war crimes committed by Russian soldiers tarnishes his credentials as a liberal intellectual. If there is a man who talks the talk and walks the walk in today's Russia, it is Vladimir Kara-Murza, and as his friends attest, he also rocks the rock, i.e., embodies emotional intelligence uncommon in our toxic times. Staying true to oneself is a formidable challenge that tests ethical resolve of those refusing to be indifferent to evil. Aleksey Losev (1989) elucidated this predicament in his sixth thesis on the intelligentsia and its affective underpinnings: "[T]rue *intelligentnost'* is always a heroic feat, the ability to forgo one's egoistic needs and concerns; it is not always an actual battle, but the readiness to enter a battle at any point and to cultivate the spiritual, creative armament for it ... *Intelligentnost'* is a steady heroic feat, even when is not fully realized" (Losev, 1989). Open defiance is not always feasible or wise. Passive resistance is a viable option, whether in the form of a refusal to partake in official lies, giving up an appointment in government structures, or offering help to the publicly disgraced dissenters. Living a moral life in the immoral universe starts with acknowledging where we fall short of our commitments, when we fail to redeem in the flesh our claims to selfhood. To reconcile our contradictory enforcements (selves) we may resort to creative accounting, but this is a poor substitute for the willingness to realign our words and deeds. That, in turn, means getting in touch with the emotional springs of our humanity and imparting a quantum of sanity to the affectively polluted environment. To change oneself is harder than to change the world, but if you succeed in embodying a more intelligent self, your decency will reverberate throughout the world and nudge it in the right direction. John Dewey had this in mind when he pressed the following point: "No social modification, slight or revolutionary, can endure except as it enters into the action of a people through their desires and purposes" (Dewey and Child, 1933, 138).

Taking Stock of One's Life

Those preaching to others need to start with themselves. Looking back at the nearly half century I have lived in America after emigrating from the USSR, I see a common thread guiding my relationship with the homeland. To secure

an exit visa, I paid for the honor of renouncing my Russian citizenship and signed the pledge that I would never claim it back. Emigration felt like an ultimate divorce, where you part not only with people you loved and the family you might never see again, but also with your language, culture, backyard, campgrounds you could not visit again, and so much more. I kept track of what was going on back home. My engagements were sporadic, and they probably helped me to feel connected more than they made a difference in the larger scheme of things, whether I sent proscribed books to Russia, organized support of the imprisoned Memorial Foundation's founder Arseny Roginsky, or arranged a petition by the American and British Sociological Associations to shield the Levada Center from government interference. Things grew more urgent in the wake of the current humanitarian catastrophe, which afforded me an opportunity to move beyond speaking to journalists and recording podcasts to donating money to the refugee programs, monitoring human rights violations, and furnishing expert testimony to the court reviewing applications for a refugee status in the U.S. With *perestroika* reform lifting the iron curtain, the opportunity arose to bring old colleagues to the United States for a series of conferences on Russia (Nevada Conference on Russian Art and Culture 1992-2018) under the aegis of the UNLV Center for Democratic Culture that "draws its philosophy from American pragmatism, which regards democracy as an ongoing experiment in collective living and institution building" (Center for Democratic Culture, 2002).² The last event in this series took place in 2018, with plans for the next gathering suspended after the war in Ukraine broke out. All along, I tried to keep in mind Chekhov's advice—start with yourself, reach out to your neighbors, communicate to others good will, give credit to your enemies wherever it is due, have courage to admit when the problem has no ready solution, avoid grand-standing and take up small deeds (Shalin, 1993).

Raising Difficult Questions

There are questions of moral and legal responsibility, of circumstances triggering the war in Ukraine, which will remain with us for a long time. In the months preceding the war, experts agreed that invading Ukraine would be catastrophic—no rational man would want to take the plunge. The first part of this prediction proved accurate, the second one raised doubt about Putin's sanity. That his close aids and intelligence services fed him wrong information in no way excuses the action of a man who surrounds himself with people telling him what he wants to hear. Putin fancied himself a restorer of the Russian Empire, invincible and destined for greatness, and

it would be no small historical irony if he causes its final demise. Now he is trapped in history, his reign contingent on the continuation of the military campaign and war in Ukraine, which is likely to persist as long as he stays in power. Putin will have to rebuild Ukraine if he wins, and his country will pay reparations if he loses, with Russian taxpayers left holding the bag in either case. And yet, Putin's hubris is not the only factor that set off and exacerbated the conflagration. Western powers, which failed to contain Putin's aggressive policies and opted for lucrative trade agreements, need to examine their own historical records. When America tells Russia it cannot stop the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, it should recall the Monroe Doctrine, which warned European states to refrain from projecting power in the Americas or face reprisals from the U.S. When the charge is levelled against the Russian Federation that it violated the world order in acting unilaterally, we should own up to the fact that Western powers engaged in unilateral military action as well. Although no formal commitment was made at the time, Western leaders left the impression with their counterparts in the disintegrating Soviet Union that they would not rush to incorporate its constituent republics into NATO. There was a consensus inside Russia in the 1990s, spanning the political spectrum from Andrey Sakharov and Boris Yeltsin to Gennady Zyuganov and Vladimir Zhirinovsky, that bringing military bases and ballistic rockets to the Russian borders could undermine international peace and set back reforms in the fledgling Russian democracy (Shalin, 1997). Given recent experience, we may conclude that Putin's aggressive politics have validated the decision of Russia's former constituents and allies to seek NATO protection, and still wonder if the advancement of NATO military installations had spurred resentment toward the West and fed Putin's belligerence.

There are other difficult questions that must be addressed in the pragmatist key. Should the West have closed the skies above Ukraine to prevent the destruction of its cities by the Russian air force and risk directly entering the war with Russia? Did Western allies err in refusing to provide Ukraine with longer range missiles and aircraft? Is it moral to let Russia and Ukraine exhaust themselves in a fight which undermines the Russian Federation's capacity to wage war on several fronts while eschewing more forceful action? If actionable intelligence shows that Putin is ready to use nuclear missiles, should the West preempt the launch or wait until the atomic attack is underway, and what should its response be?

Let me be clear that nothing justifies the brutal assault on the Ukraine and the repressions Putin unleashed at home in the service of his messianic pretensions. What he did is more than a mistake—it is a crime for which he must answer, in person at the world tribunal and certainly in the court

of history. I do not claim to have answers to the queries raised above. No formula, pragmatic or otherwise, can deliver final answers, which must be considered with an eye to the changing situation and the need to balance competing values. We should not shy away from raising such questions, however, and let pragmatist ethics inform our collective inquiry.

Notes

- 1 “For Gorbachev to emerge—and we wouldn’t have been talking here without him—generations of people [had to] come around to do something, to change what was commonly said, and so on. Arbatov and Inozemtshv played a tremendous role in this matter. I am a small potato, nothing depended on me, and all the briefs that I wrote [for the Central Committee] are accidental things, facts of my biography with no relationship to the biography of the Soviet power and Communist party. Arbatov and Inozemtshv did something that really mattered. They dealt with the Politburo members and the General Secretary. They taught these folks to deal with the unpleasant missives and very unpleasant statistics. Information that streamed through different channels was filtered at every level. The authorities were accustomed to hearing only what they wanted to hear, even though everybody at the bottom knew this information to be bogus. Whatever the level of decrepitude, people on top did not have objective information. With the help of their institutes, Arbatov and Inozemtshv changed this practice ... It is fashionable to damn Arbatov nowadays, accuse him of this and that. But he was the soviet version—well, maybe a little below that level given our conditions—of Dr. Kissinger. He was the man behind Brezhnev’s détente on our end. Détente did happen, and even though in the end it was aborted, it was not Arbatov’s fault” (Kon, 2011, 118).
- 2 “Democracy, according to John Dewey, begins at home, in a neighborly community, and is first and foremost a quality of experience shaped by free communication. We take this to mean that civic virtues are as central to democracy as political institutions, that civil society thrives in the culture which encourages trust, tolerance, prudence, compassion, humor, and withers away when overexposed to suspicion, hatred, vanity, cruelty, and sarcasm” (CDC, 2002).

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