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Killing Your Own People - a Brief Guide

A few months ago we were being told by supporters of the Kiev putsch that President Viktor Yanukovich had 'lost the mandate of heaven' by 'killing his own people'. This emotive language avoided any discussion of two important facts. The first was that the Kiev mob had contained seriously violent elements, including armed men. The second was that Mr Yanukovich had not been lawfully removed by the impeachment process provided for under the Constitution of Ukraine, and that his unconstitutional deposition had undone a negotiated agreement which would have allowed him to serve out his lawful term.

I said at the time, and have repeated since, that these facts were awkward for liberal interventionists who sided with the putsch because they a) didn't like Yanukovich (nor do I, as it happens, and nor does Vladimir Putin), b) believed that Ukraine should move closer to the EU and NATO and c) confused these objectives with various forms of idealism and utopianism among the Kiev crowd which (like most such crowds) believed it had stormed heaven and could somehow overcome corruption and incompetence by sheer force of will and youth.

Of course the history of all revolutions, going back to 1789 and forward to the various 'People Power' outbreaks of modern times (starting with the ousting of Ferdinand Marcos by Cory Aquino 1986; the attempt to bring some sort of liberty to China, bloodily defeated in the Tiananmen Square demonstrations in Peking; and resuming in the 'Orange Revolution' in Kiev in 2004, until it failed catastrophically in the 'Arab Spring' of 2012-13) is that the early promise is at best disappointed, and at worst descends into greater misery than before.

Corruption is to power as wet is to water, and can only be contained and controlled by very powerful and elaborate means, one of them being very high level of conscientiousness among public servants, another being a real separation of powers allowing the forces of law to operate without fear or favour. Otherwise the best you will get is selective prosecution of the corruption of the weak and the defeated, or of those singled out by (corrupt) power for humiliation and exclusion. How these unusual conditions, rare anywhere on the planet, can be brought about in the former USSR I am really not quite sure. In my limited experience, corruption exists almost everywhere, but in more advanced societies is more cleverly concealed than in the more backward ones. In the aftermath of the USSR, itself one of the most corrupt absolutism in human history, corruption grows like Japanese Knotweed.

I except from this story of revolutions the various uprisings against collapsing Communist regimes in the late 1980s. These grew out of the fatal weakening of those regimes, which one by one realised for themselves that their ultimate guarantee of existence – Soviet power – had gone. With varying degrees of skill and

subtlety, the Communists sought to appease those they had robbed, swindled and oppressed, and to negotiate an orderly departure. The 'revolutionaries' merely had to push, and the whole lot of them surrendered. Hungary's Communists departed almost without a tremor. Romania's bungled their departure and died for it. The others lay somewhere in between. The true story of what happened in the USSR is, in my view, yet to be told – and may never be told.

This had emphatically not been the case when the Warsaw Pact regimes were challenged in 1953 in East Berlin, in 1956 in Hungary and Poland or in 1968 in Czechoslovakia (or even in 1991 in Lithuania, where the KGB visited severe violence on the people of Vilnius) . Nor had it been the case when Khrushchev attempted to make deep reforms of the USSR in the early 1960s. The Party and the KGB removed him. Even so, his denunciation of Stalin should not be forgotten. From what I know, I think this was a very courageous move. I recall, on my very first visit to the USSR in 1984 (20 years after the fall of Khrushchev) , being shown attempts to smuggle Stalin back into respectability. It was also notable that one of the principal officials delegated to meet Neil Kinnock and his party at a British Embassy reception (I was in the press party accompanying the Labour leader) was Boris Ponomarev, a gaunt survivor of the Stalin years, who had been protected for much of his life by the appalling old commissar Mikhail Suslov, who had washed up on the Communist Party's international secretariat. Ponomarev, born in 1905, must have witnessed and taken part in some of the more appalling episodes of Soviet power, and – perhaps most amazing of all - survived them to die in his bed in 1995. I still recall his bony figure in the ornate and cosy reception rooms of our lovely Moscow Embassy (now the ambassador's residence) on the river opposite the Kremlin. He seemed to give off waves of cold.

But I digress.

Careful readers of the newspapers, especially the graphic and moving descriptions of events in Mariupol and elsewhere by that fine reporter, Kim Sengupta in 'The Independent', cannot be in much doubt that the armed forces of Ukraine, or at least persons serving with them and with their permission to do so, have lately been 'killing their own people'. The circumstances of this may be hard to be sure if, much as they are in the case of the Maidan killings.

Please read this despatch:<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/ukraine-crisis-bloody-assault-in-mariupol-dashes-hopes-of-avoiding-civil-war-9347972.html>

Well, I have long said that any government trying to maintain control over its sovereign territory may sometimes resort to 'killing its own people', and this is not, for me, in itself a decisive factor. Sometimes such action might be legitimate. What if, in the final months of the Weimar Republic, a free government's police and troops had shot down scores of Nazi storm troopers, and by doing so turned the tide? What would we then think of 'shooting your own people'?

My own opinion is and remains that the EU and the USA provoked this action irresponsibly and without sufficient understanding of politics, history or geography, and so launched a period of dangerous turmoil in which innocents have died and will die. My most fundamental criticism of it is that it was stupid and cruel. I also think it was plainly wrong, and I lack sympathy with the objective of bringing Ukraine into the EU or NATO, think this is in itself dangerous, a provocation of Russia which will make Ukraine less stable and prosperous, not more so.

I suppose this makes me a 'sympathiser' with Russia, though I have stressed again and again that I have many criticisms of the current Russian state, and I am quite sure it has used its own underhand methods in Ukraine.

The point is that these methods were a *response* to a postmodern aggression. They were a response made by a nation which has (thanks to the fact of existing on the soil it occupies) legitimate interests in the future government and alignment of Ukraine. You might as well ignore gravity as ignore such interests. They will exist whatever you do, as long as Russia exists, whatever kind of government it has.

It is only countries like ours, dechristianised, depatriotised, robbed of their own self-respect, history, culture, language, literature, laws and institutions, which can sit fatly watching the TV and guzzling sugar while they are whittled away into rumps and then into provinces of someone else's empire. Russia, not being anaesthetized by years of unearned prosperity on easy money, and not possessing a large natural moat to keep away her physical enemies, and having been subjected to (and yet survived) a 70-year attempted armed robbery of her past, her faith and culture, is less complacent.

Anyway, you who philosophize disgrace and criticize all fears, bury the rag deep in your face, for now is the time for your tears.

Despite the squawks from Washington and Brussels that the separatist referendums are 'illegal'(which is an interesting question, see below) , the real illegality in Ukraine remains the status of the existing Ukraine government, which came to power on the backs of a mob and has not followed its own constitution, and is now 'killing its own people'.

Where the source of law is itself unlawful, how can challenges to that source be ruled as 'illegal'. No doubt the votes in Lugansk and Donyetsk leave much to be desired. But they are at least as legitimate an expression of popular opinion as is the Maidan protest, which to my knowledge never held any votes at all, just used the crowd's traditional prerogative of intimidation by numbers.

And now this lawless regime in Kiev has authorised the killing of its own people. So where are the condemnations of those who said that such an action destroyed the

legitimacy of the previous government? Nowhere. They are invisible and inaudible, because they have not been uttered and do not exist.

Increasingly I think the 'West' has lost this battle, and has wounded itself severely for some years in the future. For what it has shown is that it is very willing to use militant and unequivocal ***language*** in this part of the world. But that it has no power to enforce its word (Does this remind regular readers of anything? It should). Its nuclear umbrella seems to be (theoretically) available to almost anyone who asks for the right to shelter beneath it. Credits and subsidies (somehow found in the EU's empty bank vaults, stripped by the Irish, Greek and Cyprus crises) are also – allegedly - there for all who will leave Russia's sphere of influence.

But when Russia plays the same game for keeps, the 'West' shouts louder as its actions grow feebler and its position more inconsistent. Who really believes that the USA would sacrifice a single soldier for Kramatorsk, or the EU endanger the Euro for Gorlovka? In which case, what of the other countries which have accepted such guarantees so far? Are they now safer, or less safe?

Alas, in the midst of this, we find men such as Arsen Avakov, Ukraine's acting Interior Minister in the post-putsch government, and a keen user of Facebook. He believes the promises and rhetoric of the 'West', and acts accordingly. He denounces the pro-Russians of the South-east of his country as 'terrorists'.

And so, it seems do those who have launched or taken part in Ukrainian military operations in Mariupol and elsewhere. The increasing numbers of deaths among Ukrainian civilians removes completely the assumed (and always dubious) moral superiority of the EU enthusiasts.

Of course, such actions are easy to undertake in isolation, when you have the guns and the APCs and the light tanks. But the damage they have already done to the future unity of Ukraine is enormous (though I think the tragedy of Odessa was even more effective in destroying consent to Kiev rule among Russian speakers) .

I have no idea what the solution to this mess is, apart from a readiness to compromise, sooner rather than later - a readiness, I might add, shown by Vladimir Putin, who denounced the planned referendums and endorsed the coming Ukrainian elections on May 25, which are supposed to create a new legitimate government in Kiev. How cynical this retreat was, I am not sure. Quite cynical, for certain, but still genuine in its way, is my guess. He may well have sought to demonstrate that he has, in fact, no control over such things and no wish to take matters much further, provided that the daft scheme to make Ukraine part of Brussels's sphere of influence is no gone for good.

I have never myself believed that Mr Putin wanted South-East Ukraine. His prize and aim is long-term neutralisation of Ukraine as a whole, pending its possible membership in the distant future, of some future Eurasian Union.

Crimea is simply a fait accompli which he thinks it well worth a few sanctions to retain. It has saved Russia billions in future rents for Sevastopol, and made him about as popular in Russia as Margaret Thatcher was in Britain after the Navy retook the Falklands.

But however cynical it is, his readiness to compromise has not been matched by any words or action from the 'West' which continues, as its clients entangle themselves in stupid unpopular violence, to act as if it possesses the high ground.

Personally, I think the whole episode demonstrates the simple truth of my original proposition, that Russia, simply by existing, has permanent indisputable legitimate interests in Ukraine which any realistic statesman must learn to accept. I have been pointing this out for years. So, more to the point, has Mr Putin in speech after speech after speech.. It is a pity that it has taken so many human screams, broken minds and bodies, coffins and ruined homes and lives, for the slow learners to get the message.

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