

This is the tenth and most recent letter we have received.

Have you read much Shakespeare? There are, as like as not, any number of folks reading this who are confident they've led fairly normal lives without a stitch of help from an English poet from 400 years ago. They might also rightly be wondering where this is going. I mean, what does Shakespeare have to do with the brutal Russian invasion of Ukraine?

Good question. I confess: when I start one of these I, like you, am never quite sure where they're going to end up. One thing I am certain of however, is that all of us, to one degree or another, are struggling to figure this thing out. Why would Putin do this? Why lay waste to a neighbor whose worst sin, demonstrably, was that it didn't want to be besties anymore? (I know lots of cool kid slang.) Ukraine was, if anything, ghosting Russia. QED.

Ukraine, with its Jewish president, wasn't being run by Nazis. Ukraine hadn't attacked Russia. Had no plans to. Ukraine wasn't, my Russian-speaking wife and sons assure me, persecuting native Russian speakers. Friends who come from Donbas, a region where Russian speakers are predominant, insist that they, as Russian speakers, felt no threat toward their lives, their homes, or their businesses in the Donbas. That is, not until the Russian military, aided by their criminal proxies in Ukraine, showed up and started torturing people and blowing things up.

The western media, in its glancing friendship with clarity these days, hasn't helped much. In that finest and foulest expression of free speech, they've given airtime to every bargain bin, testosterone-fueled explanation for this war that they can identify. This one says, "It's NATO's fault." That one, "Ukraine has Nazis." The other, "Putin wants a new world order." (Fine, that one has some merit. To a point.) But, "Trump did it." "No, Biden did!" The urge to transmogrify this very eastern European (and yes, it is a continent) story into some sort of American-generated palimpsest isn't helping anyone. And needs to stop.

So, who can say what led to this? Who knows? I hate to say I told you so, but...

In Richard III, Shakespeare writes some lines that help if we want to begin to figure out what's happening in Ukraine, 430 years after the Bard put it down on paper. The speech starts with Now is the winter of our discontent.

Admit that you've heard that one. Maybe not since high school, but you've heard it. That's Richard, perhaps the most horrible of the horribles ever committed to the page. And Richard wants things. He wants to be king. He wants to be loved. He wants to succeed no matter the cost. And he wants to get everybody he feels has ever slighted him in a room (metaphorically) and rub their noses (not quite as metaphorically) in it once he becomes king.

Back to Richard. After he's told us how wintry his life is, how discontent, he says this:

Grim-visag'd war hath smoothed his wrinkled front.

For me, that's where the lights went on about Putin and the why of this war.

In 2014, Russia openly attacked Ukraine. Twice. In Crimea and in the Donbas. Ukraine lost territory—land equivalent to the states of Massachusetts and New Jersey. Ukraine lost population, around 4 million residents. Chicago, roughly. Ukraine lost billions of dollars in assets in heavy industries that were pillaged, then dismantled and sent to Russia. In return, the Ukrainian economy was hammered and the country had, overnight, 1.7 million internal refugees. But those unjust, unsolicited, criminal Russian military attacks produced a curious effect. Grim-visag'd war hath smoothed Ukraine's wrinkled front.

Brutally assaulted, shamelessly robbed, Ukrainians picked up the pieces and moved on. The violence we endured had convinced us of one thing: Peace, prosperity are the desirable alternative. And they are work.

And so, in Ukraine, movies were made. Music was written. Poems and books, too. Art painted and hung on walls. People went to restaurants. Participated in sports. Planted crops. Had banner harvests. Secured trade deals. Boosted their incomes. Diversified their economy. A solid middle class developed. Babies were born in numbers this country hasn't seen in 30 years. Ukraine opened its borders to the EU. Modified tax law. Voted in elections.

On this last point: in the election of 2019, Ukrainians threw out 70% of their Parliament. 70%. Imagine. Americans, imagine. The old slaves to corruption weren't doing the job and Ukrainians sent them packing. Ukraine put useful tools—apps, hotlines, consumer protections—into the hands of average citizens to help them get the best out of their government, including the tools to turn in a crook when the best was not forthcoming.

Ukraine was moving on.

And then, hunched and stewing in his own juices, his soup tasters nervous, his courtly sycophants wringing their hands and averting their eyes, Richard decided he'd had enough of Ukraine in its weak piping time of peace. Putin, rather. I meant Putin. Putin decided.

And now we are attacked. And Putin smiles and murders while he smiles.

Whence this war? From one heart filled with envy, bent on revenge, choked by pride, covetous of what he could never possess except by force, at the head of a police-cum-mafia state that has been defined by, terrorized by its security apparatus, its siloviki, for centuries.

I hold out hope that books are true and that this will not—if Shakespeare has his say—end well for Putin.