

The Crossing of Borders

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Abstract. There are various accounts for the war in Ukraine; this essay is not contesting such accounts but, taking the classical understanding of the war between Sparta and Athens, elucidated by Thucydides, there seems to be a “hidden reason”. The latter is the declining political significance of Sparta and the expanding importance of Athens. The brief analysis of the war by Thucydides is used to establish a framework for clear understanding of behavior of nations and their leaders when, despite an absence of military threat, they opt for war. Given this context, the question arises why Russia, not being threatened militarily, opts for war against its harmless neighbor. The Soviet Union was a global power equivalent to NATO alliance, and this power was inherited by Russia. The latter could not be afraid of military invasion by the West and yet it opted for war aiming to demonstrate that it is as significant as the West. The difference between Traditional Russian autocracy and modern Western democracy is such that the latter “crosses borders” by attraction and not by military power.

Keywords: autocracy, democracy, power, war, Ukraine

Sienų peržengimas

Santrauka. Esama įvairių karo Ukrainoje aiškinimų. Šiame straipsnyje atsigręžiama į klasikinę karo tarp Spartos ir Atėnų istoriją, kaip ją nušviečia Tukididas, ir siekiama atskleisti karo „slaptąją priežastį“. Pastaroji siejama su Spartos politinės galios nusilpimu ir išaugusia Atėnų įtaka. Trumpa Tukidido Peloponeso karo analizė straipsnyje pasitelkiama kaip teorinis karkasas siekiant suprasti tautų ir jų lyderių elgesį, t. y. kodėl jie pradeda karą nesant karinės grėsmės jų pačių atžvilgiu. Tokiame kontekste keliamas klausimas, kodėl Rusija pradėjo karą prieš Ukrainą, pavojaus nekeliančią savo kaimynę. Sovietų Sąjunga galios požiūriu buvo lygiavertė NATO aljansui ir jos galią perėmė Rusija. Pastarajai nebuvo jokių Vakarų karinės invazijos grėsmės, tačiau ji karą pradėjo siekdama įrodyti, jog yra ne mažiau reikšminga nei Vakarai. Skirtumas tarp tradicinės Rusijos autokratijos ir Vakarų demokratijos yra tas, kad pastaroji „peržengia sienas“ savo patrauklumui, o ne karine jėga.

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: autokratija, demokratija, galia, karas, Ukraina

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Introduction

Throughout written traditions, there are countless texts on empires and their uses of power for conquest, and other texts attempting to explain such uses. In the modern West, the power expansions by Western nations were attributed to the economy and its search for cheap labor, resources, and markets, resulting in colonialism. Such accounts have become global, leading to the notion that all social relationships and international issues are power-laden and economically driven – its contemporary justification, a citizen is a never-satiated consumer. Of course, explanatory psychology and utilitarian “ethics” are in accord with this assessment: humans are greedy and seek pleasure, and on these points, the West is accused of decadence and even of being soft. Of course, no serious questions are raised concerning the reasons for drastic excesses in the economic activity where billionaires, capable of luxurious consumption, still want to be multi-billionaires, as if they could consume multiple times their current capacity. And the common answer is: they have *economic power* without any limits or hindrances. They can dictate national entities and governments by favoring one or another political group or party. This forms an inevitable circle: the bigger the economic enterprise, the bigger its political power, and the bigger the political power, the bigger the growth and influence of an enterprise.

To jump a little ahead, with the breakdown of the Soviet Union, there was a flood from the West of “consultants” and journalists – both intended to help Russia and former Soviet Republics, to catch up to the “modern world”. The economic consultants offered “shock treatment” in the form of economic privatization of all spheres of social life, from production to health and even education. Private enterprises and markets are the salvation. As the metaphors went, “Chicago school won against Marxism”, and this school was all for unhindered economic activities both by local citizens and international players. Meanwhile, the journalists were equally positive, asking such questions as “Now that you have capitalism, how do you like democracy”? This innocent conflation of capitalist markets with democracy was never noticed in the West. After all, the phrase “free market” is deemed to be democratic. By the time Russia realized that this phrase is quite mistaken, it was too late: the concentration of the economy in the hands of oligarchs and their political supporters took the stage. Of course, the oligarchs were not concerned with the well-being of Russians – they too crossed borders and went where markets required – for profit and political power. No public involvement or institutionalized laws need to be established – unless as a facade to placate the future “consumers”. It seems, then, that the basic building blocks of modern conflicts are in place: Economic competition and the struggle for resources in the global market, lead to the exercise of military power – so to speak “projecting” the interests, and above all the economic interests of a nation, at the end of a gun – another circle, where the military power will guarantee victory in the economic sphere and the economic victory will guarantee expanded military power. In this essay there will not be any challenges to such accounts; they are a given for all, even the uses of nationalist ideologies such as Make America Great Again, or China First, or tendencies toward autocracies around the globe and in Europe and very preeminently in Russia. These trends seem to indicate the “truest” accounts for war and the exercise of power.

Disclosing the Hidden

Classic thinkers, such as Thucydides, would be more cautious: how do we account for the Peloponnesian war between Sparta and Athens, a land power and a sea power – a war which led to the decline of the Greek world of the *polis* and the classical age. In addition, due to the various treaties between the Greek states, it is the first political war (cf. Gress 1998). Finally, it also reveals the essence of the political. What is important in this war is the explication of politics and power which were pushed into the background by the metaphysics of Plato and Aristotle. The unleashing of a war, a thirty-year struggle between the Athenians and the Peloponnesians, was a result of various reasons, one among which is the presumed increasing power of Athens that caused Sparta to take notice and opt for war. Yet this does not make sense given the simple geographic state of affairs of the two rivals. But first, let us look closer at the classical meaning of cause for war (Thucydides 1996).

There are two kinds of causes of war: *diaphorai*, the differences that separated Sparta and Athens, and *aitiai*. The latter is regarded as *alethestate prophasis* (the truest cause) which never appears in the discussions and speeches; it remains hidden. It must be observed that the Spartans, specifically since the Persian war, were regarded as the strongest and most esteemed in the Greek world. For this reason, they established severe laws and ways of life; all were geared for the enhancement of strength and esteem. Yet since the Persian war, there appeared not only another power but a new kind of power: the Athenian confederacy comprised of sea power. It was not only not assailable by the landlocked power of Sparta, but due to its political structure, it was capable of further expansion. It was “democratic” and open and every decision had to be made by the citizens regardless of social standing (Thucydides 1996: 14). This sea power did not threaten Sparta either by conquest or enslavement; it could not. The danger that came from this new power radiated from something other which was more uncanny and irritating, nagging, something that could *cross borders* without military power and thus could not be endured by the most esteemed among the Greeks. The increasing power and importance of the Athenian confederacy threatened to diminish and even abolish the *political significance* of Sparta. This is the point of irritation: without any military threat or attack, without any changes in relationships between Athens and Sparta, without any internal trouble in Sparta, the most esteemed of the Greeks began to lose their esteemed position. The threat of *future insignificance* and political oblivion could not be endured; it created hidden anxiety. The only solution was self-assertion, specifically since the Spartans had invested their entire mode of life into the significance of strength and esteem. The threat was the mere being of the other, the expanding significance of Athens, and the insignificance of Sparta. Thus war had to be waged for political significance or – death.

The Persian empire, ruled by a god of gods, is expanding through military might till finally, it decides to take “Europe” (mainly Greece). Land-locked Sparta sends its warriors and Athens sends its fleet – an alliance between autocracy and democracy – to block this empire. And here Sparta gains its esteem and overall significance. Both return victorious with their different constitutions and drift apart – as mentioned, democratic Athens, as a

sea alliance, becomes most attractive in open trade, social life, tolerance of others, and even their cultural differences. As was said numerous times, Athens is open not only to others, but to the universe and its wonders – freedom to think, contest, and create, freedom as philosophy. One can raise questions concerning every issue, whether about the nature of the universe or the essence of justice and even discuss whether the latter is possible in autocracy. Such questioning was not a power to change any subject matter, not even autocracy, but a very uncomfortable irritant for the rulers and an opening up of questions for populations living under autocratic power. Such questions will be regarded as a pollutant, an infectious virus, corruption of social order, and thus an enemy. There is no invading power involved and a threat comes from the very presence of a *polis*, a political society that attracts and through attraction expands and infects others with the most “dangerous” ideas. Spartan allies, who were not too eager to be vassals, but had to obey Sparta, were in danger of becoming corrupted by, what the Spartans called “lovers of boys”, by the “decadence” of Athens. And yet, without using any military power, without threatening Sparta’s greatness and power, Athens is growing in significance and it is the latter which is everywhere and “encircles” Sparta – certainly not by the sea-bound power.

The decision to enter war can only be completed to the extent that the true cause of the trouble remains hidden. If the anxiety of the threatening political insignificance was manifest, then it would have already constituted an admittance of weakness, inferiority, and defeat. How could the most esteemed, strongest, be moved by anxiety? Whoever is troubled by anxiety in face of another power, is already the weaker, doomed to failure. Only when the anxiety of insignificance is excluded that the Spartans can decide to declare war. This is not to say that the hidden anxiety has vanished. On the contrary, it remains an all-pervasive presence. What kind of presence? Sparta’s insignificance. The various points of conflict and difference, both political and military, could be mediated by agreements and treaties. Indeed, the present self-assertion, the demands, and the call for the annihilation of the enemy are efforts to abolish its growing insignificance. Only in this context can we grasp why political conflicts begin to appear as causes of war. The more the parties concentrate on the points of conflict, the more they argue, and the more the true cause of the conflict is hidden. To speak existentially, all the discussions of the delegations are dealing at the level of mere inauthenticity, although the latter seems to be most authentic when the points of conflict appear to be the causes of war. Thus all the appeals to peace and freedom were as inauthentic then as they might be today. The more one engages at this inauthentic level, the more pervasive becomes the fundamental cause of conflict. The Spartans, who started the war, are a standard of conservative power, i.e. in the classical sense where a group’s existence is secured when it is identical to its ruling position. To be politically conservative does not mean simply preserving a tradition; after all, the maintenance of a ruling position quite frequently calls for changes in the tradition. This is obvious from the speech given by Sthenelaidas after the members of the Athenian delegate had presented their case.

He says that he completely fails to understand the many words offered by the Athenians. They have heaped many praises, but cannot contest the fact that they have transgressed

the rights of Sparta's allies. While once they have stood against the Persians, now they confront Sparta as something injurious and thus they deserve a double punishment since having been virtuous they have become decadent. But then and now we remain the same, and thus we shall not give in if we are to be sensible when our allies are mistreated; we shall not wait till tomorrow with our support. Their suffering is today and not tomorrow. Others have money, ships, and horses, but we have tested allies and it is our duty not to surrender them to the Athenians. Here we need not decide by judgment and word about injuries; rather we must, with all dispatch and all means of power, close ranks with our allies. And no one should instruct us that we, whose rights have been transgressed, should engage in long debates. Only those who transgress rights should engage in long debates. Thus, as it is honorable for Spartans, we decide for war. The speaker called upon the assembly to split into two groups: those who were "with Sparta" and for war, and those who were against the war. Although there were many who were against the war, no one dared move to the assigned location for the "peace party"; no one dared be "anti-Spartan". From more recent events in the United States, and all the turmoil, it may be noted that going to war against Iraq had created a similar situation. Those who are not for war are being blatantly accused of being unpatriotic. As a very conservative power, the United States must use the same rhetoric as the Spartans. Iraq is injurious and is violating our safety and security (despite zero evidence, and even evidence to the contrary) and hence we must declare a righteous war and – that goes without saying – expand our empire (Thucydides 1996: 48).

From the background of the true cause, the Spartan behavior becomes obvious: the seeming effort to mediate and be reasonable, when everything has already been decided. They call a meeting in which there is a seeming pretense to reach a free decision for or against war. They send envoys to Athens with conditions for peace fully aware that (a) those conditions would not be acceptable to Athens, and (b) if they would be accepted, new conditions would be devised. This shows how people act when they make the sole reason for existence their rank, eminence, and power, specifically in face of other people who are emerging as significant and thus place into question the rank, power, and eminence of the former. How do the Athenians see the situation? Are they cognizant of the true cause of the trouble? Do they know what compels the Spartans to war? Not at all. Spartans claim that they want peace, and peace will be achieved when all the Greeks "regain their freedom". But this means the complete dissolution of the Athenian sea confederation and the resumption of complete preeminence of the Spartans and their allies. And this is how the demand looks to the Athenians as depicted by Pericles. For him, it is obvious that Spartans had sensed the Athenian "decadence" for some time, and now it has become completely clear. While Athens proposed that the differences could be resolved by a mediator who would preserve mutual positions, the Spartans did not accept this invitation and decided to resolve the conflict not through mediation but through war. Thus Spartans no longer come with accusations, but with commands. If Athenians concede to one or more, make no mistake, the Spartans will make more difficult demands. While they might say that the fulfillment of the demands will mean peace, actually giving in to them, means the

certainty that more demands will be placed upon Athenians. Spartans will deem that the acceptance of their conditions was founded upon Athenian fear and hence they will be emboldened to ask for more. Then the greatest as well as the slightest demand placed by one party over the other – parties which possess equal rights – without an external mediation – results in subjugation (Thucydides 1996: 80).

Athenians perceive the situation in its essence. But the true reason for war is not revealed. In a historical hermeneutical sense, we cannot lose sight of the “meaning of meaninglessness”, of the rebellion against one’s own decline into insignificance when one’s historical hour has struck – the anxiety in face of the future and those to whom the future belongs. It must be noted that the term “anxiety” has no psychological connotations: it is an existential awareness of the closing of temporal horizons that lead not to powerlessness, but to insignificance. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, its military power was just as available, but its significance was abolished and that is a period in which a state, premised on power, becomes most dangerous, not because it lacks power but because it is powerless to confront a political question of others who, while equally powerful, are not a threat – they are strangely attractive to citizens of given autocratic states.

Hard Master

The Peloponnesian war, as a classical example of a confrontation between radically distinct social-political orders, becomes a hard master to all sides – but above all a transformation of the form of the democratic *polis*. Engaged in a war, all focus turns to power and its extension, and Athenians must extend their sea power. In public debates, all issues had to be reduced to ends and means, to purposive rationality. This led to pure power calculus, including political positions. Once this logic of power is unleashed the last step of the decay of *political ethos* becomes obvious. The unhindered striving for power is endless, where every reached step is only an enticement for new steps. It is characteristic that the unchained purposive activities toward power go hand in hand with the unshackling of individualistic selfishness. Politics become means to establish for oneself glorious careers, leading to luxurious lives. Thus we have the steps of the slow decaying of initial democracy, with its dialogical center. Hence the discussions of issues for using and extending power are quite clear. Even in democratic Athens, for the populist Kleon, democracy is useful only for establishing political terrorism, both within and outside the state. And for Alcibiades, it has become a mere means to achieve personal prestige, power, and enrichment. As soon as democracy no longer serves his purposes, he declares it to be a mere stupidity about which one has nothing new to say. In the Greek war, there were two main parties: the democratic and the oligarchic-autocratic, the first favoring Athens, the latter siding with Sparta. What is peculiar about this war is the way that language became subverted. This can be traced in the debates where efforts are made to attract allies by one side and to keep them from leaving alliances by the other side. This effort begins the subversion. Each thoughtless reaction and venture is seen as courageous, while every careful deliberation is identified with cowardice. Any reflective concern will be seen as a manifestation of fear, and any

deliberation of options that attempts to avoid force will be considered as intellectualism and weakness in face of necessary action. A firm attack on all fronts is truly manly while reflective and peaceful deliberation will appear as a deviation from the hard necessities prescribed by leaders. The noisy and “inspired” leader is to be trusted and the one who contradicts him is a “despicable traitor”. Only those who promise victories and command the rhetoric to sway the populations to despise those who reflect and question, enjoy the honor of “wisdom”. They move the people and promote terror within and without the state. The population dissolves into party lines, each ready to attack the others without any concern for thought, openness, personal integrity, and dignity. Who still wants to reflect, to be concerned, to avoid promoting degradation of others, is accused of infirmity, being unpatriotic, and even complicit with the enemy (Thucydides 1996: 199).

Thus all forms of inequity took root in the Hellenic countries by reason of the troubles. The ancient simplicity and trust, most closely tied to honor, were laughed down and disappeared; and society became divided into camps in which no man trusted his fellow. What is here lost is simple trust. It is of the same origin as the honorable-noble (not a blood nobility but one of bearing oneself). The noble is one who is free, one capable of allowing the other to be what the other is; this is the element from which each person lives with others. With the disappearance of the honorable-noble, all trust vanishes from human relationships. The domination of mistrust opens the door to “decisive” action. The most difficult position in this situation is that of the intellectual. Those who are incompetent and feel inadequate in a discourse over public matters, do not wish to enter into protracted debates, and hence deem it more fitting to act than to think. They are the “men of action” and thus have no scruples in suppressing their hated adversaries, the intellectuals by all demagogic means, specifically by “inspiring” the “people” to “take matters into their own hands” against the “peace-peddlers” who are actually the “enemies” of the people. Since the intellectuals counsel that no power should be exercised where one could easily find a rational solution, the “men of action” find fertile ground for their attack on the intellectual. Intelligence is the first sacrifice since it is least armed against the arbitrariness of power. Such political thought has become a function of constant securing, maintenance, and enhancement of power, and was no longer capable of setting any other aims. It had to turn toward imperialism which easily coincided with self-serving individuals and not the *ethos* of the *polis* (Thucydides 1996: 366-368).

This classical analysis forms a warning for our age and is applicable to all warring camps and their use of power – an endless war that surpasses all reason. Some contemporary analysts follow the same line to understand the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the broader clash between the western alliance of NATO and Russian autocracy (Lebow 2010). Just as Thucydides, Lebow argues that the issue is not security or pursuit of economic supremacy, but an issue of status, belonging in the broader context of honor. Just as Spartans had to wage war Against Athens, So Russia has to wage war against Ukraine to reestablish its honor, status, and equality. But for NATO this establishment of equality is a challenge to its supremacy and thus a need to show its own power. The classical example is the same. Alcibiades opposes any careful considerations concerning Athenian

power extension, such as an expedition to conquer Sicily. In this context, he proclaims that we have acquired power by being ready to aid anyone, whether Greek or not, whenever occasion lends itself, and this without any careful reflection or deliberation. Had we sat still, or deliberated as to whom to help, then our domination would not have increased and we would have been in a situation of constant fear from the strong. One defends oneself against the strong not when one is attacked, but when one prevents attacks by attacking. It is not for us to decide to what extent we want to dominate and rule; the case is the opposite: once we have entered this path we cannot avoid but attack some and lead others in order to maintain the energies and tensions. Without this, we would expose ourselves to the danger of being ruled by others: hence we rule them. We cannot think, as others do, of peace and rest, if we do not want to surrender our domination.

The politics of Alcibiades not only differ from those of Nicias and his careful reflections, but also from those depicted in the Melos dialogue (Thucydides 1996: 351 fn). According to Alcibiades, the power of Athens is a consequence of *prothymia*, a readiness to support anyone, before any thought, who seeks the help of Athens. This readiness is what allowed the Athenian extension of domination and power. The very request for help from Athens comprised an occasion for extending Athenian domination. Precisely this very occasionalism constitutes the moment of “preventative” warfare. In this sense affirmation of power means being ahead of any possible threat through one’s interventions and support which extend one’s power and prevent others from exercising their own. The extent and limit of rule no longer depend on the Athenian will; rather the affirmation of domination consists in a ceaseless extension of power given any opportunity. Alcibiades proclaims this ceaseless extension as a law of domination based on power. Consequently, the defeat of Sicily, under the guise of lending aid to the Athenian “relatives”, is simply another manifestation of this rule. This rule does not have any limit. As Alcibiades would surely remark, once we have convinced the Sicilians to be part of our domination, then we shall extend our domination over entire Greece (Thucydides 1996: 372). But this assumption of the logic of power for the sake of more power is all pervasive and surpasses the question of loss of significance. Even so-called philosophers, adhering to some nationalism, religion, or ideology, fall prey to this logic of power for the sake of power. What is the way out of this return to the tragic age of the lion? None other than philosophical dialogue.

Histories and Controversies

Vast historical and logical accounts by “experts” on the relationship between the Soviet Union and contemporary Russia propose opposing reasons for this war against Ukraine, but first, let us set the stage for a broader encounter. The rise of the Nazi movement in Germany in the first part of the 20th Century was explained in economic terms – the deprivation of German people due to the severe sanctions by the victorious nations of World War I. There were numerous movements in Germany that promised to reestablish economic well-being – including a very strong presence of a communist party, closely associated with the rise of the communist party in Russia; yet the sense of nationalism,

regaining German “pride” and “self-respect”, after the humiliation in World War I, was a silent background captured and exploited by the Nazis, and Hitler, swearing to *make Germany great again*. Hitler used the economic troubles to blame any social group as the cause of trouble, above all the Jewish financiers and liberals, including communists who, according to Nazi propaganda, were obedient to Russia. Nazi party alone stood for Germany and Germans finally flocked to the nationalist cause, and Hitler was declared to be a divine savior. As the famous philosopher, Heidegger, declared, “Fuehrer and Fuehrer alone and his law is German reality”¹. Having become an absolute ruler, he rebuilt the economy and focused on the production of armaments. Huge parades, all demonstrating military power were a prelude to war. To reclaim its significance, Hitler began to expand by placing demands on democratic nations to test how far he can push them – and they complied with his demands – just like the Spartans kept demanding more till Pericles recognized that any yielding to demand will be seen as a sign of weakness and lead to other demands. Hitler sensed this “democratic decadence” and finally made Germans “stand tall” by invading Europe and finally Russia. The principle here is not a rational dialogue but an irrational *Triumph of the Will*.

This was the moment of truth that autocratic Russia and the democratic West formed an alliance to stop the march of the German Reich (empire) to conquer the world. The alliance was not only military but also political, with numerous meetings between the West and the “gallant ally” to plan the future of the entire world. We all know the outcome of that War: the alliance stopped and defeated the Reich and divided the world into East and West, apparently recognizing their differences. Russia, with its traditional autocracy in place, wanted no outdated “bourgeois” contamination in its “worker’s paradise” and closed its borders, although it retained the old Russian thinking (disguised as Marxism-Leninism) to be the moral savior of humanity, and above all – savior from the decadent West (Edie 1965: 168). To save its own citizens from being corrupted by the West, Russia closed its borders and established what was called the “iron curtain” including the Berlin wall. Meanwhile, the West both promoted a global vision of a “free world” with markets leading the way and, being quite open, also attracted customers. There is no need to discuss the many factors of tension, including the exporting of viable Communist revolutions around the globe, specifically among peoples colonized and exploited by Western nations. Both sides were engaged in “containment” of each other. The so-called “cold war” also included an arms race between “super powers”, most beneficial to Western industrialists and the Russian defense establishment. The Anglo-American way of life became proliferated across the globe where the dollar was the king and English became the language of commerce, science, and politics. Even in the Soviet Republics, there were Western products available only in “dollar stores”, accessible to visitors with dollars. This and other incursions by the West were a silent reminder for the local populations that their “workers paradise” was a façade, waiting to be lifted (see Mickunas and Pilotta 2020: Ch. 3).

¹ “German Studies”, a speech delivered on 3 November 1933 at Freiburg University. English translation in R. Wolin 1993, Ch. 2

This façade appeared constantly with people attempting – at the risk of their lives – to cross the Berlin wall, and no one wanted to enter the worker’s paradise. This raises a question: despite the West also being premised on power, why did people struggle to get to the West and not to other nations? An explanation that the West and its power offered protection will not hold. There are other powers, including the former Soviet Union and contemporary Russia, China, which offer “protection” from other powers. Perhaps the West, despite its historical misdeeds, is an attraction, offering persons their rights, protected by the power of institutions and laws which, while fallible, are not available in any variety of autocracy or theocracy. In principle, such institutions and laws are in place even if various persons do their level best to circumvent them; meanwhile, in autocracies and theocracies the “head” is the law, and all who challenge his legitimacy are enemies of the people and “disappear”.

Many explanations can be offered – economic, technological, and ideological, the fact remains that the Russian empire imploded and called for openness and transformation. It took a very short time for the Central Europeans of the Warsaw Pact, and the occupied nations, called the Republics, to declare independence from Russia and proclaim that they belong to the Western civilization. They wrote their constitutions requiring separation of powers and formed national governments based on elections. Then, there are the historical accounts of the expansion of NATO, comprising a threat to Russian security, specifically when the former republics, as parts of the Soviet Union, and Warsaw Pact members were not only “invited”, but also were most eager to join (Kaplan 2022). According to the common version, these nations could not trust the decline of, what they called, the Byzantine and most brutal autocratic empire. The Balts and central Europeans know from experience that this empire has repeatedly enslaved all peoples within its reach. It would have been suicidal for any government of these nations to decline an opening to join. Just to mention the Polish leader Walesa who, during the period of negotiations between NATO and Russia, declared that we must cage the bear. Vaclav Havel agreed and pointed out that we live in a vacuum and that is why we want to join NATO. He expressed a deep fear of Russian nationalistic resurgence. Indeed, the Baltic peoples are certain that without NATO they would be back in the Russian empire.

In turn, it is argued that the expansion of NATO into the areas owned by the former Soviet Union and its vassals poses a threat to Russian security. The continuous tension between Russia and the West seems to indicate the fear of such a threat. Following the discussions between Gorbachev and U.S. secretary of state Baker under the Bush administration concerning the role of a unified Germany and whether such unity should belong to NATO, reached a conclusion that independent Germany might go its traditional way and become an unchecked power. So let it be part of NATO. Meanwhile, the new president of Russia, Yeltsin, talking with Clinton insisted that the Baltic states should not be brought into NATO. But they became members. In the West, the discussion concerning this expansion was a matter of open and public concern, and the latter did not focus on the economy or even power but on questions of how far should one push the expansion of NATO without ending up in an unacceptable “humiliation” of Russia (Kaplan 2022: 27).

Such expansion might damage Yeltsin's fragile efforts to form a democratic society and provoke some ultranationalists to take power. In short, NATO's expansion might intensify the instability in the zone between Germany and Russia and could convince Russians that the West is trying to isolate, encircle, but not integrate Russia into the European security system. Extending the reasons for caution appealed to historical evidence of Germany and its "humiliation" after World War I. The demoralized Germans turned to severe nationalism and a total dictatorship (Kaplan 2022: 28).

Just as Sparta, Russia was encircled by something unacceptable, a way of life that rejected closed borders, spread its decadence, allowed "unnatural" relationships, and all imaginable disruption and distortion of what was sacred to Russian autocratic and Orthodox tradition. The presence of NATO's circle was a paper tiger, without a threat of penetrating Russian borders. But the encircling by the spread of those strange ways, ideas, promoting public gatherings and demanding the "rule of law" and separation of powers, was unstoppable by any military force. The spreading of Western ways, which has become of global significance, constitutes the very reason for the insignificance of an empire that, while equivalent in power, cannot protect itself against the surrounding by dangerous way of life. The only way that it can reclaim its status is to demonstrate its presence not by exporting its way of life – an autocratic and even theocratic system, but by the use of power. No doubt, Russia was demonstrating such power by challenging the West in various regions by supporting autocrats in the Middle East, China, and Latin America. The point is this: Russia is making a statement that we are back and are globally as significant as the West. *One misunderstanding should be avoided. Russia was not against capitalism, since its economy is run by Putin's supporters, the oligarchs, and not some communist party. So the invasion by capitalist ideology was no threat. Something else was in the background, and not necessarily NATO's military power.*

The Invasion

In the West the invasion of Ukraine is interpreted in common ways, ranging from a pure power grab by an irrational dictator engaged in "The Stalinization of Russia", including "cleaning up" (Stalinist purges) of the entire Russian population, to military efforts at reestablishing not only the "imploded" Soviet Union but reclaiming the Russian empire. Was the amassing of the military on the Ukrainian border a threat of war or a bluff to force the West to offer concessions? Here the question asked by Pericles reappears. If we grant concessions, we know other demands will be presented all the way to the demand that we dissolve our sea alliance – in a contemporary setting, all the way to the demand to dissolve the NATO alliance. After all, during the discussion of the issues, Biden said that Ukraine will not become a member of NATO, and even offered transparency in military exercises in the region: on-site inspection of U.S. missile defense launches in Poland and Romania to verify that they could not fire offensive cruise missiles (as Putin claimed they could), and a conference to reconsider twenty-first-century European security with special attention to Russian concerns (Kaplan 2022: 28). All to no avail and any debate

is irrelevant when everything has been long since decided. Or is it, in the final analysis, the case that there is no way out but to demonstrate Russia's power as a denial of its insignificance? And thus the invasion, with the warning that Russia is one of the greatest nuclear powers in the world and has certain advantages in the newest weapons. Nobody should have any doubt that any direct aggression against Russia will lead to crushing and most horrible consequences for any potential aggressor. As Putin's former personal guard and current director of the national guard, Zolotov, added, "We do not have a border with Ukraine. It is the American border, because they are the masters there, and all these ... are vassals. And the fact that they are pumping them full of arms and are trying to create nuclear arsenals – all this will cost us our future. /.../ So we must defend our country"². In short, we can attack another country and no one dares to defend it.

The following pattern is in place. There is no Ukraine – it was a creation of the Soviet Union – and it can be occupied because it belongs to the Russian empire. Hence any pretense that Russia is reclaiming the two Russian Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk will not hold. Putin's speech on Feb. 21. has a true ring. He is not speaking about the rights of the "separatists" who wish to join Russia, but about the very idea of Ukraine as a national state; his claim is that Ukraine is an inalienable part of Russian history, culture, and spiritual space. Here again, the empire encompasses "historic Russian lands". At his war proclamation he no longer looked like an elected official but as a furious Tsar, equivalent to Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great, Catherine the Great, and above all Stalin – all Russian rulers as unifiers and extenders of the Russian Empire. Moreover, he is surrounded by military men who make certain that they agree with his views.

As mentioned above, conservative power is bound to maintain a closed and rigid system to guarantee the permanence of a ruling pyramid. The ruler is always the law and is neither wrong nor can be questioned. This is precisely what is said of the traditional Russian world by Vladimir Sorokin.³ The Russian structure of power has not changed for five centuries. The pyramid of power contaminates the ruler and instills in him the poison of absolute power. Tatiana Stanovaya points out that Putin is surrounded by military men in charge of informing him on all matters, and the "information" Putin gets is what he wants to hear. It is an impenetrable information bubble, comprising one more image of a closed world. Indeed, the image of isolation is vivid where Putin is sitting at the end of a very long table, and at the distant other end sits a couple of military men. This isolated pyramid might have prevented a full understanding of the consequences of starting a war: increased isolation of Russia, sanctions, compelling neutral neighbors – Sweden and Finland – to join NATO. The image of being greeted with flowers as a liberating hero from, what Putin called, the land of drug addicts and neo-nazis in power in Kyiv, never materialized.

There is a prevalent understanding, which includes Russia, China, conservative Americans, and European autocrats, that liberal democracy and its institutions are a

² *The Economist*, February 26, 2022, p. 21

³ *Le Monde*, May 25, 2022.

threat and must be defeated. Liberalism spread as an attraction without any power and, in most cases challenged and went against the global economic powers. Precisely such a spread is unacceptable to those who resumed the “divine right of kings”. This phrase is to be taken literally and is evident in Putin’s claims from his initial assumption of power. The strategy to obtain the “right” is evident when Putin begins to cite biblical phrases and revive great heroes from the past, such as deeply religious admiral Ushakov; he was canonized by the Orthodox church in 2001 and became a patron saint of nuclear carrying bombers. He once said that the storms of war would always glorify Russia, and Putin added “that is how it was in his time; that is how it is today and will always be” (see Robinson 2019). Here Putin repeated the strategy of Stalin who restored the persecuted Orthodox church as a way of rallying Russians to fight against Germany. The Orthodox collusion with Stalin was never repented, and today the collusion continues with Kirill, the patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church, calling Putin “a miracle of God”, and the church has become a supporter of the war. In fact, Kirill declared that the current war is “a Godly affair” that will keep Russia safe from the horrors of gay pride marches. This goes even further, when a priest in Rostov, next to the Ukrainian border, declared that the Russian army was cleaning the world of a “diabolic infection”.

We encounter the classical confrontation between two powers and its “hidden” reason. The threat of future insignificance is not due to military might, but due to the presence of a disruptive irritant. Thus, already in 2005, the *siloviki* as “secret guardians” of Russia and radically anti-Western, presented Putin with a brief, titled “Project Russia”, with the major warning that democracy was a major threat and the West was the enemy. Thus in 2007 in his Munich speech, Putin rejected the notion of Russia’s integration into the West. Later in Moscow, he proclaimed that nuclear weapons and the Orthodox Church were the two pillars of Russian society – the one for security and the other for moral health. The war against Ukraine is intended to demonstrate that we are to be reckoned with and any accommodation with the West and its democratic ways is dead. As the head of Russia’s security council, Patrushev, proclaimed: Russia is locked in a civilizational and geopolitical fight for its life which the West is trying to destroy by aggressively advancing *liberal values* that contradict Russia’s worldview⁴. For a while, the massing of the troops was regarded as a threat designed to get concessions, but that was not the case: to pull back would be a sign of weakness and without a loss of power equivalence – back into insignificance.

For Ukrainians the attack convinced them that their destiny lies with the West – the opposite of what Russia wanted, and the longer Ukraine survives, the stronger the NATO forces will become – not what Russia wanted. Meanwhile, the pro-Russian Ukrainians were sure that some kind of rapprochement was desirable, but the invasion showed that this hope is dead and for those Ukrainian Russians, Russia has become a by-word for fascist invaders; Russia’s possible occupation is not designed to rebuild, but to destroy and hold, and close Ukraine off from the rest of the world – as is the case with Russia and

⁴ *The Economist*, February 19th, 2022

its self-isolation. Of course, the isolation of Russia is also enforced by the World (apart from China), with an uncertain outcome for Russia and the West.

The confirmation of the thesis presented at the outset with respect to the Spartan and Athenian war comes from one of the most respected intellectuals in Russia – Ekaterina Schulmann. The thesis, implicit in Thucydides’s account of the Peloponnesian war is that in face of the strange expansion and attraction of Athens, the future significance of Sparta is in jeopardy. Despite its power, the future belongs to the new, open, and “attractive” way of life of Athens. Without having to mention Thucydides Schulmann comes to a similar conclusion. As reported by Alexey Vlasenko⁵, she points out that the invasion of Ukraine is not only to demonstrate that Russia is “back” as equally significant but above all that Putin did this to “halt time”. In Russia, the younger the social generation, the more pronounced the decline in violent crime and consumption of alcohol, and with it the imperial nostalgia is fading into the past. Meanwhile, Putin, the guardian, and rebuilders of the empire sees time slipping away, telling him that he will be succeeded, in his own words, by traitors, his own children. They do not share his views and he is the last defendant of the fortress – the empire. His children will surrender the fortress to the enemy, although they do not regard it as an enemy.

Future generations sit and say: we will wait and when you are gone, it will be our turn – the future is on our side. We will not storm your fortress – we wait. You dream of geopolitics and your next-door neighbor, who made unacceptable and very disturbing strides, is a bell warning that your time is up. Your children will join the strides and live an open life and prosper. The answer you offer is clear: I will build a concrete slab and crush them and they will not get the future they wanted. You will even detonate an atomic bomb so that the fortress itself is dead and no one will enter it – it will be forever unconquered. Ekaterina Schulmann is now designated by Putin’s “law” as a “foreign agent”. This is the fate of any thinking person, including the “intellectuals” accused of being servants of the enemy, in the Athenian expansion of power. Before he committed suicide, Hitler demanded of his troops to destroy everything that was not destroyed by war, because Germans do not deserve anything – they have betrayed their Fuehrer.

Concluding Remarks

There is an annual survey of global tendencies toward autocracy or democracy, and each year the tendencies shift. In this sense, the tension between them is manifest, in the extreme, with military power or at least its threat. In principle, the tension is between open and closed societies such that both contain such tendencies. In open societies, there are groups tending toward shutting down some liberal democratic phenomena, and in closed societies there appear “infections” by the liberal phenomena. The issues between such tendencies are not just nationalistic, but also cultural, including the clash between civilizations (Mickunas 2019). In this context, each tendency crosses borders such that the

⁵ *Community*, Apr. 26, 2022

proponents of one tend to be in favor of similar proponents in other countries or societies, creating internal tensions in each society. Currently, a resolution is not on the horizon, unless some global catastrophe will call for cooperation.

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