OLEKSANDR SAMBRUS





Chronicles of Peace and War

A Research Novel

Glagoslav Publications



Letter Z

Chronicles of Peace and War

A Research Novel by Oleksandr Sambrus

Translated from Ukrainian by Svetlana Payne

Proofread by Jack Monro

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The first-person narration in this book conveys the point of view of the fictional protagonist. All his friends, relatives and associates are, likewise, a work of the author's imagination. Views expressed by these characters represent their personal subjective opinions.

In writing this book the author used the following materials: statements / declarations / thoughts / comments made by Ukrainian, global, Russian, and Belarusian statesmen, politicians, military and religious leaders, ambassadors, press secretaries, advisers, military experts, et al. Statements /declarations / thoughts / comments of non-Ukrainian (in particular, Russian and Belarusian) individuals have been translated into English. The author is not responsible for absolute accuracy.

To ensure continuity, consistency and clarity of the narrative, the above-mentioned materials have been slightly edited and abridged. The occasional failure to quote specific sources stems from the necessity to maintain the momentum of narration (and therefore shall constitute no grounds for appeal). On no account has the author sought to reduce the cohesiveness or intent of the pronouncements or distort their context (i.e. no wrongful or unlawful actions have been undertaken). The author particularly disclaims responsibility for possible regrettable imprecisions / errors in presenting the factual components of this work of fiction. Songs / poems / verses have been composed by the author himself, excepting works of folklore and works specifically named in the text. All rights for those compositions are reserved as are the rights for the novel in its entirety. When quoting from the novel, referencing is mandatory.

Dedicated to the 'brotherly' Russian people who have invaded my country¹

¹ **Brotherly people**: a political cliché, a pupular idiom or ideological trope used in launching and managing political and ideological campaigns in imperial and post-imperial states. Today, it is still common coinage in Russia inasmuch as Russia is intent on conquering her neighbours and overpowering neighbouring nations.

This ideologeme is firmly planted even in the minds of some prominent Europeans. On 15 April 2022, in Rome, during the Good Friday festivities, according to the script created by the Vatican, the Cross, at one of the Stations, was carried by Albina, a Russian girl, and a Ukrainian girl by the name of Irene, thus symbolising 'reconciliation' between the two peoples.

'These are two brotherly nations, and I believe that in the nearest future friendship and love between them shall be demonstrated many times over,' said the Russian girl, Albina.

'We hope that there may still be a turn towards peace, and what will change, before anything else, will be relations between our countries. We are brother nations, we are ever so close,' said Irene, the Ukrainian.

The festive procession, torches and all, returned to the ancient arena of the Coliseum, for the first time after the Covid pandemic. A thousands-strong crowd of pilgrims and tourists held up lit candles while Pope Francis, under his canopy, was seated on a raised platform from where he could survey the crowds.

A senior figure in the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church later commented on this initiative from the Vatican: 'Gestures symbolising reconciliation between Russia and Ukraine will only become meaningful after the war is over and those guilty of crimes against humanity have been justly condemned.'

Practically at the same time, Emmanuel Macron, the French president, referred in a TV interview to Russians and Ukrainians as 'brotherly nations' – and this notwithstanding a many-months-long full-scale war unleashed by Russia on Ukraine. All this notwithstanding the wronged nation perceiving such rhetoric as an insult.

December 2021. 'Your Country Is Cobbled Together from the Off-Cuts of the Two Empires!'

Taras and I, we were among the first to arrive – came at a gallop and scored some seats in the best row.

Right on our heels, Liubchik breezed in too. 'A starlet of local significance', according to Taras. I disagree wholeheartedly – I believe Liubchik can attain the municipal level without even trying... True, she dearly craves to be in the centre of everyone's attention – if only with the outfits she normally chooses. A somewhat boyish body type definitely helps in this uphill struggle. On the other hand, going is tough at times but Liubchik gives it her all...

She would only ever be seen in pants. Goes without saying, nothing but avant-garde would do, but today she really excelled herself... Imagine if you can – one trouser leg some funny rusty colour, the other one yellowish. Provocative, of course, but there was some funny sense of measure there, too – the colours muted, not a complete eye-sore. Then there was this belt – black and cracked from time and wear. Perhaps bequeathed to her by her dear granny? Not a thin job, either, but a broad affair, some fifteen centimetres-wide at least.

'What-ye-say, boyzzz?' she twirled in delight in front of us.

The rusty-coloured leg got extended to one side. And back. Then the yellow one – sideways. Back. Peng? *A la mode*. Stylish. Just the thing for the young ones...

'What's there to say? Freaking awesome! Quality vintage!' – I needled her slightly but hastened to sweeten the jibe: 'A knockout!'

'You'd be top of the charts in any hang-out! No doubt 'bout it!' piped in Taras.

Then, there was Liubchik's hair style... Pure avant-garde, too! Half her skull practically shaved clean, the other – festooned with tufts. And her mane – quite something as well! On the left, it curtained the entire half of her face, and her eye – the poor thing probably never saw the light of day... I tried to get a rise from her:

'Look here, gal, can you even see who you're talking to?'

'Partially...' her standard riposte. Then again, really, why bother inventing something new? 'But you, Stinger, don't you get your knickers in a twist, my other eye clocks it all, and how...'

She sat down next to us, pulled out of her cosmetics bag a little mirror and the lipstick and, concentrating on her reflection, set about laboriously applying colour to her babyish lips...

'Are you totally nuts?' Taras was appalled. 'Are the girls with lips still on the agenda? You are what, fresh from the evening Khreschatyck?' 2

She replied, matter-of-factly:

'You all for stamping out the sprouts of modernity? Shock-horror! Last century! What's with this country – any new initiative is trampled underfoot, right in the bud!'

Oops, dear Taras... Got taken down a peg? Enjoy, it could've been worse...

Luckily just then Arkady sidled up, saved the situation. This very fact was already to his credit for he hates showing up anywhere ahead of time – 'Me? Hanging about, waiting? No way!' As for Arkady, he only wears branded clobber, no point trying to describe his get-up.

Just then Alka had arrived too. She's not the one for making a splash with her fashions. Everything about her is down-to-earth and laconic, she won't bore herself with a usual 'How's it going?' or some such crap.

'Hi!'

'Hi!'

Our Alka is more of a traditionalist, perhaps even a borderline conservative. It's beyond belief – she wears her hair pleated in a braid! True, it doesn't reach down to her waistline – as used to be the case with celebrated beauties in God knows which century. Her plait was of medium length. And here she was – a picture of concentration, leafing through her notepad, looking for something. Truth be told, Alla and I – we'd been on the 'brink' of something, then it all somehow cooled off but now things were sort of picking up again. OK, we'll live and see.

Aha, finally here they were too – Spyridon and Bolik, both out of breath, unmistakable sound of Deep Purple's 'Highway Star' blasting forth from their headphones. Must've cranked it up to some serious volume if we could hear it all too!

Spyridon's earpiece was held to his ear, while Bolik, accordingly, pressed the other one to his. Those two have a clear-cut division of labour: Spyridon chooses a hit and Bolik calibrates the volume.

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² **Khreschatyk**: the main street of Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine. (Hereinafter, unless specifically stated, notes are provided by the translator.)

'Phew! We missed much?' – both rocking to the rhythm of their record.

'Nick of time... Another minute and we'd be yielding seats to common freshers, seeing as they are about to launch a proper offensive...' hissed Arkady in reply.

'Commoners,' in his mind, are first- and second-year students. We are year five³, so, automatically, the 'nobles'.

'So, which muzak today gets more respect among the rock crowd? Classic stuff? Glam-rock? Hard stuff? Or perhaps industrial, God help me?' Arkady wasn't ready to let go.

'He-he, the garage type,' I joined in with a little dig of my own.

'Perhaps, a nice quote came up from some place?' Arkady kept ploughing on. 'Or you dug up something interesting?'

'Indeed, we have.' Spyridon beamed. 'From Jimmy Page, that's Led Zeppelin. He says: "I'm just looking for an angel with a broken wing"...'

'I agree here,' Bolik sprang up, happy to intercept the initiative. 'All of us... well, it's not impossible, innit? – have an angel... And then – bang – and his wing gets broken...'

'Christ Almighty! Rescue me, bros!' Arkady rolled his eyes upwards, throwing up his hands. 'Hold me tight or I won't survive all this drama and collapse!' He pulled a face and turned away.

'Turn it down, though... You'll frighten the crowd,' that was Alla, trying to reason with Spyridon and Bolik. 'Especially, the commoners.'

'Let them listen,' Spyridon disengaged himself from his earpiece. 'Rock is a phenomenal thing. Not like all this tired pop crap!'

'Rock,' Bolik joined in, 'it's the nerve of our times! It holds up a mirror to our beastly reality, not like some glammed-up tosh! As such, quite good for the commoners!'

'Who's arguing?' Taras chuckled. 'It's just way too loud!'

Arkady turned back, facing them again, raising his finger, clearly, about to deliver a short speech – that's his speciality.

'Ah well... Goes without saying, blasted history is forever repeating itself... Take Roman Empire – what happened there? It kept losing its hold, little by little, till some bloody plebs – barbarians, in short – did it in, once and for all.' He turned towards Spyridon and Bolik: 'Still, esteemed rockers, do lower your volume. You are in a public place – that's for starters. And secondly, our commoners may get such a high from your music that they'll just move in and finish us off, the lot of us...'

They took the hint, and didn't just turn the volume down but killed the record entirely.

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³ Typically, a master's degree requires five years of study.

It's worth mentioning that Spyridon and Bolik are die-hard veteran metal rockers. Perhaps been like that from childhood. 'Our metal is from God...' – they say so themselves. Dunno, perhaps it's true. Whatever the case, their getup is in strict compliance with whatever fashion dictates to 'metalists': short studded leather jackets on top, tattered trousers below, and boots – must be three kilos apiece. One would need some well-toned-up calves, to wear those. Massive signet rings on nearly every finger. Should there be a bust-up – which, allegedly, does happen, from time to time, in their world – these rings must come in very handy as a defence weapon. Our rector, should he ever clap his eyes on them, gets immediately crippled by a severe migraine. Still, they are quite considerate, in their own way – do their damnedest to stay out of his sight. Thing is, the rector – that's before succumbing to his migraine – can lay into them like a man possessed. What's the bloody point – now, in the final year of studies when the end is nigh – to look for grief?

As for Taras and me... Against such a colourful background we both look like some poor relatives – no quirky traits to offer, and usually kitted out in regular casuals...

Sure enough, the audience at our *alma mater*, the Institute of Cinematography, was filled to bursting point. That day, we all came because of a very important lecture – to be delivered by the Professor of Modern History Dashkevych. There were even crowds from other universities and colleges – who also got in on the act. Small wonder, though – the situation in the country was extremely tense, one couldn't relax even if one tried... For several months now Russia had been concentrating her troops on our borders. In response to all enquiries, they invariably came up with a standard excuse – those were training exercises; or sometimes even with something boorish, like: 'On our own territory we do whatever we please.'

So here we all were, sitting, waiting...

'Some nice rellies you've got, man...' Taras gave me a wink.

Oh no, he was about to set off... I could understand it, though, what with everyone being so anxious... And so Taras got onto his pet subject:

'What a mighty name they've given you – Kiril! Your surname is really cool, too – Zhalovaha! Boy, does it reflect your pernickety nature! 'Tis like an early warning for the unsuspecting – don't trifle with this dude! Or else prepare to be stung. You haven't got your nickname for nothing – Stinger. Come on, you must've stashed some vitriol – to aim at this well-touted lecture? After all, this invited professor is a celebrity...'

⁴ This Ukrainian surname comprises two words: 'жало' (pronounced *zhAlo*) – stinger; and 'вага' (pronounced 'vAha') – weight.

'As if we didn't have our own professors!' that from a gruff Arkady.

'Guys, stop bickering,' Alla chimed in. 'The recent developments – they do call for a fresh eye.'

'Come on, let him take the piss! Stinger, do say something fun...' Liubchik gave her fringe a resolute shake, suddenly equally keen for me to offer something 'spicy'.

Crikey, the way they were laying into me... Then again, the atmosphere was electric, affecting us all, even if we'd all been on edge lately.

To tell the truth, I didn't feel like wisecracking. What if this professor would tell us something sensible? Why should I deride him in advance?

Meanwhile Taras seemingly forgot all about me, busy typing something into his mobile. Must've been a significant message to his recent love interest – I wasn't even sure what her name was. Perhaps Olga. I only knew she was from the Art Institute.

As for Spyridon and Bolik, having had an earful of rock, they now were quiet – something to be grateful for... Theirs is a somewhat weird tandem: Spyridon a real beanpole while Bolik, on the contrary, a shortie. Still, something does keep them together... Perhaps it's those scripts they are writing for the documentaries? Even if they do pepper those with insertions more appropriate to feature films. In short, their output is quite a mix.

Frankly speaking, our ability to joke had recently been on the wane. Small wonder, though, the situation was hardly conducive, quite the reverse. For several months now we'd all lived in a state of anxious presentiment: would Putin attack us or not? My lord... What had the world come to...

Americans keep repeating it, over and over again, like some mantra: get ready for an attack! They even mentioned a provisional date. The American attitude, of course, was a serious indicator, they don't use such predictions lightly. Then again, the Brits told us the same. When all is said and done, their intelligence services do rank highly in the world...

But as for our president – he insisted on the opposite. Enough, he said, of this scaremongering! We've got intelligence information from our own sources. Those rumours you disseminate bring about nothing but panic, they erode our economy. As it is, investments are already leaving our country...

So, how to work it out? Who made more sense about any of it?

'Quiet!' suddenly, the entire audience was shushing. 'He's here! He's here!' Indeed, the professor was already making his way into the auditorium – determined, confident. In his wake – the rector, our Department Chair, and two more characters... Assistants? Interns? Who could tell, but the procession looked impressive. Quite a spectacular entrance.

The professor placed his folder on the lectern.

'Hello everybody! Today we shall talk about the most extraordinary events unfolding in our world.'

He delivered this extremely forcefully. The audience fell silent immediately. 'Let's make a brief excursion into history and recall the situation in Europe as it existed after the First World War. From the geo-political point of view, several empires – once powerful and important players on the global arena – suddenly crumbled and collapsed. Almost overnight! Several new states sprang up on the territory once belonging to the Russian and Astro-Hungarian Empires. The map of Europe went through a radical change. Whilst prior to the war there had been 23 states, now there were 34! Peoples who had been, over years and even centuries, fighting for their independence, finally achieved statehood. So, dear audience, these are facts from history.'

The professor clasped his palms together and carried on.

'Just then, from under the ruins of the two empires – Russia and Austro-Hungary – emerged an independent state of Ukraine. Worth noting, Ukraine was among the biggest in Europe – both in terms of territory and population. Let me briefly remind you: after the Provisional Government was overthrown in Petrograd by the Bolsheviks, in Kyiv in November 1917 there appeared the Ukrainian People's Republic, with Professor Hrushevsky at its head. Within a year followed unification of the UPR with the West-Ukrainian Republic... The Bolsheviks, however, intervened yet again: in December 1917, they established their power in Kharkiv. Even though a mere month earlier, only 10% of the electorate had voted in their favour in the election into the Constituent Assembly, ... But what was Lenin's *modus operandi?* He pursued a very cunning policy. On the one hand – as decreed by the provisions of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk⁶ – he recognised the right of the Ukrainian people to

⁵ **Mykhailo Hrushevsky** (1866–1934): Ukrainian academician, politician, historian and statesman who was one of the most important figures in the Ukrainian national revival of the early 20th century, leader of the pre-revolution Ukrainian national movement, and head of the Central Rada (Ukraine's parliament in 1917–1918).

⁶ The Treaty of **Brest-Litovsk:** a separate peace treaty signed on 3 March 1918 between Soviet Russia and the Central Powers. It recorded Russia's defeat and its exit from the First World War.

Earlier, the Central Rada had appealed to Germany and Austria-Hungary with a request for military assistance against Bolshevik aggression. This treaty was signed on 9 February 2018 likewise in Brest-Litovsk. In exchange for military assistance, the Ukrainian People's Republic undertook to supply Germany and Austria-Hungary (where there was a threat of famine) with large batches of food and raw materials. Allied troops stepped into Ukraine almost immediately. On 2 March 1918 they entered Kyiv.

independence. But on the other – what are you talking about? To accept the loss of Ukraine in its entirety?'

One of the assistants clicked a button on the control, the curtains slid apart, now displaying a large map of Eastern Europe.

'The difficult times did not stop there. In early February of 1918, a treaty was signed between the UPR and the Central Powers, under which they recognised the sovereignty of the UPR and the Central Rada.⁷ The UPR applied for protection against the Bolsheviks. The German and Austrian forces entered Ukraine and shortly re-established the UPR's jurisdiction on territory stretching as far as its eastern borders. For a time, order and stability were reinstated...'

'Germans... and order...' someone couldn't stop themselves, 'can't have one without the other...'

The professor made a pause. He could, of course, rebuff the arrogance, but didn't. Taras and I looked at each other – perhaps, that's what he was after: a lecture conducted as a sort of immediate exchange with the audience?

'Hmm,' the professor cleared his throat. 'Since we are on the subject of the Germans... Let me share this interesting factoid with you. The order is all well and good but survival is of primary importance... The German soldiers, starved after their experiences at the Western front, dug into the local food... And do you know what they were after most of all? You wouldn't believe it – pork fat was an absolute favourite. And all this because their metabolism had been deprived of fat during the three – or even more – years of war...'

'Ha-ha! That's truly curious!' came another voice from the amphitheatre.

'Yes, one can tell many stories about this period... Later on, the German Occupational Authority fell out with the Central Rada over their dissatisfaction with the feeble stance of those socialists. Instead, they decided to put in a hard-line dictatorship, and at the end of April in 1918 Pavlo Skoropadsky, a descendant of Hetman Ivan Skoropadsky,⁸ came to power. Skoropadsky was himself pronounced Hetman at the so-called 'congress of grain growers'9... Let

⁷ The **Central Rada** (the Central Council) of Ukraine, established on 17 March 1917 as a revolutionary representative institution, decided to establish the Ukrainian People's Republic and proclaimed its independence. Subsequently, it was the state's highest legislative body.

⁸ **Hetman:** a political title used in Central and Eastern Europe, historically assigned to military commanders.

⁹ On 29 April 1928 the All-Ukrainian Congress of Grain-Growers in Kyiv (predominantly consisting of landowners and peasant landholders, about 7,000 delegates in total) taking advantage of the protracted crisis in the UPR's Central Rada and supported by the German occupational forces and the sympathetic attitude taken by affluent peasantry and Cossacks, pronounced Pavlo Skoropadsky, a former general in the Russian imperial army (who was at the same time pro-Ukrainian), Hetman.

me just say that the role played by the Germans in that brouhaha of ours was pivotal and far from straightforward. At the time, they were acting in Ukraine as sort of... "king makers". This is a separate and painful subject... However, look here. We are digressing from our main topic.'

The professor came up to the map.

'In the end, the Bolsheviks returned to Ukraine – they were forced out, yet again, while their managerial bodies were relocated to the Russian Kursk... The regimes in Ukraine kept alternating with lightning speed... So, while our politicians were sorting out their differences, Bolsheviks moved in, yet again, from the north, in January 1919. This time they did manage to proclaim Soviet power in Kharkiv. However, for some time the city was under the control of the White movement. Still, in December of that same year, 1919, the red commissars once more advanced, and this time they really came to stay. That's how Soviet power originated in Kharkiv and gradually started spreading out...'

'Hm... nice, innit?' I covered my mouth so that only our gang could hear me. 'The esteemed professor has built his lecture exclusively on the factual basis of modern history!!! Yet he could've recalled our glorious Cossack republic – the Zaporozhian Sich!¹⁰ The one that the fearful Russian Empress Ekaterina the Second got rid of...'

'Hush, Stinger!' Liubchik put me down. 'The last thing we need now is your wit.'

'W ell, when you're a professor yourself...' Alla joined the ranks, 'you'll be free to plan your lecture as you please.'

The professor went around his lectern.

'It has to be said,' he went on, 'that the Treaty of Versailles accommodated the demands put forward by the newly created states. Alas, with one exception: that of Ukraine. Its larger part – the Right and Left banks¹¹ – ended up, in fact, within the confines of its erstwhile colonial power which, at the time, meant Bolshevik Russia. As for its western territories, there was an idea to create a national Ukrainian entity upon the wreckage of the Austro-Hungarian Empire – perhaps, not so representative but still... Unquestionably, that would have been a step forward... Unfortunately, the Versailles meeting didn't agree, otherwise it would have meant re-carving the territories of several adjacent nations. In

¹⁰ **Zaporozhian Sich:** a semi-autonomous polity and proto-state of Cossacks that existed in the 16th to 18th centuries.

¹¹ In 1667 Ukraine was partitioned along the Dnipro River: the west part, known as the Right Bank, reverted to Poland, while Russia was confirmed in its possession of the east, known as the Left Bank, together with Kyiv (which is actually located west of the river on the Right Bank). The arrangement was confirmed in 1686 by the Treaty of Eternal Peace between Poland and Russia.

which case all of them would have resolutely opposed the move. And that's how it came to be: Versailles, hereto dressing up in the mantle of democracy, cunningly bypassed the issue of granting the Ukrainian people – one of the largest ethnic groups in Europe – their statehood... Following all this, in July of 1919, the Entente Cordiale recognised the jurisdiction of Poland over Eastern Galicia. 12 It got worse. The Riga Treaty of 1921 ratified this decision: the territory of the Ukrainian People's Republic was divided between the USSR and Poland. [In March 1923 the Conference of Ambassadors of the Principal Allied and Associated Powers, based on the terms of the Riga Peace Treaty between the Soviet Russia and Poland, upheld the decision to make East Galicia part of Poland with the proviso that the Ukrainians be given autonomy (the Poles never implemented this decision)]. And in this fashion the division of Ukrainian territory between Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, and the USSR became final. Thus, Ukraine's age-old aspirations to sovereignty were doomed...

And then in 1922 the Bolsheviks announced the creation of the USSR, and therefore, Ukrainian Left- and Right Banks, already under their power, were made a constituent part under the name of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, the UkSSR. No one, as per usual, asked for the people's opinion. And finally: in March of 1923 the Conference of Ambassadors of the Principal Allied and Associated Powers, based on the terms of the Riga Peace Treaty between the Soviet Russia and Poland, upheld the decision on making East Galicia part of Poland with a proviso of establishing autonomy for the Ukrainians (which was never implemented). And in this fashion the division of the Ukrainian territory between Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, and the USSR became final. The Ukrainians didn't get a chance to create an independent state of their own. However, there was one extremely important factor: the Soviet Union treaty enshrined the right of the union republics to secede!'

Taras and I exchanged impatient glances. It all sounds correct... Still, we'd like to hear something closer to home... On the other hand – how could you move forward without digging deeper into history?

The same assistant clicked his control again: the screen now showed two maps side by side – Europe before and after World War I.

'The Second World War broke out,' carried on the professor. 'Under the terms of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, in 1939 the Polish segment of the Ukrainian territory became incorporated into the Soviet Ukraine. After the war the process went even further: the Soviet Ukraine received the remainder of what had been previously shared among other states. Thus, the territory was

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¹² The Entente Cordiale was signed in 1907 between Great Britain, France, and Russia to counter the threat posed by the Triple Alliance of Germany, Italy, and Austria-Hungary (also known as the Central states).

consolidated, even if in such a way. It's a different story that all of this took place within the Soviet Empire. In essence, Ukraine's new enlargement was purely a formality. Goes without saying that the civil rights for the local population were not even a subject for discussion... Meanwhile, in the forests of the Western Ukraine, members of the UIA turned to intrepid guerrilla warfare.¹³ Please note that some of those units were still active in the early sixties... However, one can never win over a behemoth like the Soviet Union. Consequently, those endeavours aimed at national liberation failed. Long story short, it all ended up with us existing within this simulacrum of a state – an administrative-territorial unit called the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic – all the way up to 1991. To tell the truth, all hopes for anything better were thus crushed, for what felt like forever...'

The professor made a pause and approached the map yet again.

'And then something happened that had been the subject of dreams, not hopes, not anymore. It's incredible but not a single intelligence service, not one Western analytical think tank ever could imagine the disintegration of the USSR! It's quite significant to remember that this 'colossus on the legs of clay' had been kept in existence by the 25-million-strong army of the Communist Party members! And not one among them came out into their street and cried out: what on earth is going on? Why we'd been living in such confidence and optimism for so many years and now what? Suddenly, it's all in ruins? Understandably, it's a huge subject and a separate matter, let's put it aside for now...'

The professor cleared his throat.

'And thus, the break-up happened momentarily but – note! – legitimately. After all, let's not forget that the Constitution of the Soviet Union provided for the rights of individual republics to secession! As regards Ukraine, the will of the people was further enhanced at the national referendum where 90% of those taking part voted in favour of independence, and the decree was passed by the Ukrainian parliament. So far so legal and substantiated. And that's what it felt and looked like over the course of many years. However, even now, even 30 years later, the tectonic consequences of that decomposition – the disappearance of that monster, the USSR – are still being felt. It is obvious nowadays, that the erstwhile motherland was gradually undermined by the "ulcer of imperialism" – there was no way it could reconcile itself to such a state of affairs! Naturally, for a while it mimicked democracy but eventually reverted to its filthy basics...'

The professor extended his hand towards the map.

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¹³ The **Ukrainian Insurgent Army**: a Ukrainian paramilitary and partisan formation founded by the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists on 14 October 1942. It engaged in armed resistance against the Communist regime in Western Ukraine.

'And that's when barbaric things started happening... It transpired that the "rule of force',' as it existed in the times of both world wars, was still very much there. In April of 2008 the NATO summit was deliberating the issue of enabling Georgia and Ukraine to join their defence union. Yet Germany and France did their utmost to block such a decision! The culmination arrived during the in-camera session of the NATO-Russia Council. When the agenda moved to Ukraine, Putin flew into a rage. Turning to President Bush, he hissed contemptuously: "You do realise, George, what this Ukraine really amounts to? It isn't even a state! Part of its territory is, in essence, eastern Europe. While another part, and a significant one at that, has been *our gift to them*!" He then went with his transparent hints that should Ukraine be after all accepted into NATO, this so-called state will simply burst at the seams. In other words, that was a thinly veiled threat that Russia may consider annexation of Crimea and Eastern Ukraine. And then... Sort of, think of it...'

The professor stopped to draw breath and I saw my opening:

'Surely, to feel equal to "George", and also to look taller, he wears special soles inside his shoes...' I finally felt in my own element, and whispered, to our gang, what felt like a totally innocuous witticism. 'It happens to midgets... those who wear size-5 shoes but harbour Herculean ambitions...'

'Well, that's debateable,' Taras whispered back. 'Peter the Great was two metres tall but his feet were size 5 ... This, by the way, is a very eloquent detail...'

'Hey, the two of you, Stinger, shut up!' Alla glowered at us. 'You, Taras, too! Some of us are trying to listen!'

'And that's how it all came to be,' the professor gave a sigh. 'And only thanks to the stance taken by several countries, primarily the Baltic states and Poland, it became possible to smooth this situation over. The summarising communiqué stated unequivocally that leaders of 26 states provided guarantees and undertook the responsibility of acceding Ukraine and Georgia into NATO!'

The professor stepped away from the map and turned to face the lectern.

'Let me reiterate: some bestial transformations are plaguing international agreements! After all, the topic under consideration was an attempt on a sovereign country, a founder and member of the UN since 1945! The country whose sovereignty and the right to secession was recognised even by the Soviet Constitution! Yet, the leaders of the main European countries continue yielding to the Russian President's blackmail! And all this on the continent tirelessly proclaiming the principles of democracy! The continent where large and small countries are allegedly enjoying equal rights, enshrined in important agreements and treaties! Finally, let's ask ourselves whether the Final Act of the Helsinki Accords of 1975 is translated into reality? It has, after all,

confirmed such profound precepts as the inviolability of national frontiers in Europe. Also, equality of partner countries. And especially, human rights!'

The professor looked around the audience.

'Obviously, we all remember that Putin acted on his threat against Georgia. As for Ukraine – even more so. He keeps applying pressure in this direction and doesn't miss a single opportunity to declare that Ukraine has no historic rights to independence and sovereignty! In other words, the break-up of the Soviet Union is nonsense. An epic geopolitical catastrophe... A convoluted conflict of various political forces that has brought about creation of a 'fake state'! Allegedly, the claims put forward by Ukraine are nothing more than irresponsible political manoeuvring... Let me be absolutely frank: modern history has never seen such lawlessness!'

Professor Dashkevych grew silent but suddenly his face lit up with a mischievous smile.

'You know, Putin's evolution as regards this historical question is simply ridiculous! He even stated, once, at one of his press conferences, that Ukraine had been dreamt up by... Count Pototsky!'

The audience broke out in a murmur of indignation.

The professor carried on:

'Let me remind you. The Pototskys were the richest magnates in Ukraine. They owned hundreds of thousands of serfs. So, which one of them "dreamt up" the Ukrainians? Putin, of course, doesn't go into details, for his processing of the facts of history is... let's say, extremely arbitrary. And recently he insisted on something else... It turns out Ukraine was incidentally invented by Lenin when, in 1922, they were putting together the Soviet Union. As if Ukraine had never had a mighty – let's be more precise, powerful – movement for national liberation. As if there had never existed any other variants of the state formation! What glibness of the tongue – if that's what it's called. Nothing but a cynical shuffling of the ideas and facts of history. It's evidently as common as swindling at a gambling table. It's a pity but some people take it on trust, especially abroad where they know nothing about any of this and remember even less. However, initiating a historical discourse with the "master of the Kremlin"? Insanity. Although even school history books – if he even remembers they exist – say that a Kyivan Prince, Yuri Dolgorukiy, "4" was the founder

¹⁴ **Yuri Dolgorukiy** ('Long Arm', c. 1099–1157): a prince of Rostov and Suzdal. He spent much of his life in internecine strife with other princes of Rus' for suzerainty over Kyivan Rus, which had been held by his father and his elder brother before him. Although he twice managed to hold Kyiv and ruled as 'Grand Prince of all Rus', his autocratic bearing and perceived foreign status made him unpopular with Kyivans, leading to his presumed poisoning and the expulsion of his son in 1157.

of Moscow! Let's remind ourselves that at the time when the Russian capital was only about to be built, numerous Orthodox cathedrals and trade quarters had already long since existed in ancient Kyiv. Yet, Putin the "historian" feels it's best to leave it all out, as if it's a glitch of memory...'

The professor pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped his brow.

'Meanwhile, there is no limit to Russian appetites, the whole thing is on the up and up. They are boring the world with this age-long trope: our country is allegedly cobbled together out of the off-cuts of the two erstwhile empires. Our northern neighbour is ready with a plethora of arguments. This hackneyed assertion that allegedly we are the territory 'defiled and usurped by nationalists and extremists" that must, finally, come into embrace of the "principal" nation!'

Someone cried out: 'Do they feel it's unfair that part of our population are ethnic Russians?'

'Does one feel injustice when some of your compatriots ended up in another country? Come on, each European country has its national minorities - what of it? If we were to dig deeper into this question we could end up, yet again, on a slippery slope leading to the situations that had provoked the First and the Second World Wars. After all there were agreements put in place after the most recent meat-grinding experience: enough! No more trifling with the frontiers, whatever the previous history of their creation. They are the way they are now, and that's it. Taboo! It's even worse embarking on any of this now. Makes no sense whatsoever. The world is full of possibilities... Move back to your historical motherland if you feel so aggrieved... Get integrated in the country where you live... Cultural and educational institutions, various associations, etc. So do whatever you please! It's nothing like it used to be, when everything was harshly proscribed and regulated. Nowadays we have TV channels, the internet, books, press – no one is cut off from anywhere! Make your choice! The main thing is that borders are open! One is not constrained at all! It's all ludicrous... To make such considerations a priority? It's pure insanity. To unleash a war because somebody "resides in the wrong place"? To provoke a bloodbath, send people to slaughter? Including those who "be of one blood" with you? Barbarity! Antediluvian stuff!'

The professor came up to the map. He picked up a pointer and was about to show something with it, but instead returned to the lectern.

'Yet nowadays it isn't simply some crazed drivel... A huge concentration of force is observed along our entire perimeter! We live under immediate threat of the Russian intervention – and this is not a bad dream.'

The professor heaved a deep sigh.

Taras leaned towards me, agitated: 'But why? Why is it happening like this?'

As if he could overhear, the professor picked up:

'It is the right time to ask why the great European powers are staying silent? To demonstrate their spinelessness? No, it's because *they are afraid...* They feel vulnerable against such an imperial monster! So what should we all do, given the situation? Are they at least capable to express their decisive stance?'

The audience froze in breathless silence. Suddenly there was an eruption of indignant cries:

'But it isn't only Europe in NATO! Americans are members too!'

'Let the Americans give those freaking Russians a good kicking! And call it quits! Isn't it clear who's the strongest guy here?'

'And maybe even proactively?'

'Nah, don't talk nonsense... A whack is all very well but it would destroy everyone else at the same time! No, there's got to be another way...'

'Yes! Yes! We should all unite!'

'That's it! That's the answer!' exclaimed the professor excitedly. 'We should all unite: Europe and America, Australia and Japan – the entire civilised world! And not just them: Asia, Africa, Latin America – everyone. And that would be a steely, persuasive, the one and only response!'

'Right! To come together and push forward as one! And no beating about the bush!'

'Only militarily! With such...'

'Wait! That's not what I meant, not at all!' Professor Dashkevych threw up his hands. 'Calm down! Self-control and common sense! What's really required now is a powerful counter-strategy, not something advocated by some hot-headed militants!'

'Is there any other way? To keep tickling them with sanctions?'

'Ha! That's the source of all fakes – their sanctions. These very sanctions have been in place for so many years after Crimea – and? Russia doesn't even feel the itch!'

'I mean something else,' the professor elaborated. 'I mean joint resolute and efficient measures!'

'Bah, nothing will come out of it!' Taras waved his hand in frustration. 'All like before – they'll keep going in circles... Sanctions, my elbow... Just empty talk. What good are sanctions when Russia has oil and gas? Europe must completely renounce all that stuff, stop licking the imperial backside. That would be the most effective measure!'

'True!' Arkady perked up. 'Giving up oil and gas – that's the ticket! Smack on the money! Till this happens nothing will ever move. But how could Europe do it? They are not ready to agree to this, that's the point...'

'That's enough,' piped in some guy. 'The civilised world is planning, by 2050, to walk away from the use of harmful fuels. So what, we should all wait until that happy time? When it all gets resolved by itself?'

'Resolved? No way our "neighbour" will sit on his hands until 2050! We'll get swallowed up way before!' Spyridon flared up.

'Are you all off your rocker? What are you talking about – 2050?' bristled Alla. 'We'll then be.. what? Over fifty? With hardly any appetite for life left!'

'What utter rubbish!' Liubchik gesticulated animatedly. 'Nowadays a woman is young even if she's over fifty... Seen how they look?'

'Sure, fashion, plastic surgery, the works... But there's no cancelling the laws of biology... No, by 2050 we'll lose our thirst for life...'

The bell erupted out of nowhere. The exhausted professor wiped his face with a handkerchief:

'Now, what do we conclude? All that's now happening to us may be summed up with a degree of irony: an enforced impetus for joining ranks. Have they really forgotten this proverb – love can't be forced? So what, they're trying to smother us in their embrace? Must have forgotten, looks like. Then again, we all at some stage got drunk on illusions. Such an empire collapsed! We were jubilant and got complacent, started cutting back the army and engaged in disarmament. And so on and so forth... Yet a disintegration of such a monster simply cannot take place without some latent consequences. And here it's coming back to bite us. And will be with us for quite some time...'

The professor grew silent to take breath. The audience, once again, grew resentful:

'They keep banging on about us being one people! Once he's got a bird in his claws, the predator will bear his gnashers straight away!

'Look, why are they forever miffed? It's all forever against the grain? The Baltic states are bad. Same with Poland. Moldova, Georgia – the same old story. Don't even mention Ukraine – all die-hard bastards...'

'They only like dictatorships!'

'What's there to understand? They fear NATO's extension! So, looks like NATO is our only guarantee of safety and independence!'

The professor raised his hands placatingly.

'Dear friends! Let's briefly summarise and refrain from emotions. It's not NATO they fear but democracy. That it may seep in through their concrete walls. And that it will close its steely hand over the throat of their disgusting authorities!'

'Right you are! That's it!' the audience started chanting. 'Uproot all this villainy!'

The audience was united in their vociferous resentment.

The professor started hastily packing up his belongings.

'So, it means...?'

The professor was clearly reluctant to talk about anything else. It looked, though, like he was being prevailed upon. His face reflected a conflict of emotions.

The audience fell silent, yet again.

'... war?'

The professor stayed silent for another moment, still undecided whether he should say something else.

'Well, you are perfectly aware that over the last several months Russia has been concentrating its forces along our borders...'

Silence, again. He made a resolute wave of his hand – ok, I'll be out with it! – and breathed out:

'Yes, war... However, if someone is afraid of this evil word, we could call it something else: intervention, onslaught or simply conflict...'

He was speaking softly but his voice was reaching every distant corner.

'It looks like war... is unavoidable...'

And having promptly assembled his possessions he rushed out towards the exit. The assistants removed the map, picked up the pointer off the lectern and hurriedly followed suit.

We all started raising up from our seats. Packing was also done in silence. It felt as if a bomb had just gone off here...

In the corridor there was a general rush forward, and then the agitated hubbub:

'So, what does it mean, in the end? Why has this West gone all flaccid? Russia should be really taught a good lesson for all her mischief?'

'Wallop bloody Russia! With all our might!'

'Tear those bear's claws off! Scrape the eyes out!'

'And those Kremlin towers - to hell!'

'A Kievan Prince was stupid enough to have moved northwards from his estate and – with nothing better to do! – founded this bloody Moscow, to our common grief! So, we all now must live with the consequences!'

The crowd started breaking up into small groups where heated arguments continued:

'It's weird where it concerns their Putin. Some 10 or 15 years ago he might've got away with what he's after... But now? Lots of things got clear by now, even the blind ones can see. No, all of this is... just madness, that's what it is!'

'He gnawed off Crimea and now is sharpening his teeth to bite off what? The entire Ukraine?'

'Come on, there should be a plaque dedicated to him, and what's more – somewhere very obvious. For our population has been sort of comatose up till now. Whilst he's managed, through his mean deeds, to bring everyone together. To make us one!'

'But he's just an idiot! He's cut all of us off by his criminal deeds! And this is a statesman? Laughing stock! Can someone like this even foresee the consequences?'

'Sure thing, all know by now: as a tactician he may well be a cunning fox. But as a strategist? He's a nonentity! And which is more important? So there...'

'Something else comes to mind. Allegedly, the guys from his year intake into the KGB school recalled him as something miserable, humdrum... Cagey, too. So they slapped this nickname on him – the Moth...'

'Ha! So why has this "Moth" become, thirty years later, president of the biggest country in the world? That's the incredible bit!'

'It is true. Same as the fact that out there, in Russia, they are labelling us "fascists"! And call our authorities "junta"! Even if we have free elections! And there's a true plethora of political parties!'

'That's it! Totally unlike their totalitarian pressure house!'

'Exactly! We've got the sixth president in place, unlike their "irreplaceable leader"! We're free, we speak our minds – not whisper tremulously in dark corners lest someone would nick us...'

* * *

Lectures, individual assignments – it all went on as per usual. Still, now our major problem was planning a sabbatical, given by the syllabus at mid-point of the final year. This meant conceiving and writing a script for a short film and also getting a blessing from the head of the respective creative workshop. After that, one could shoot a film, get a credit, defend your graduation thesis, snatch your much-coveted degree paper, and wave the beloved institute goodbye!

Although each graduate student is perfectly aware that possessing the degree documents does not guarantee getting a job. For all that, without such papers you could not be even considered human... Each layabout behind each counter, eager to flog you some crap for twice the price, is sure to have a managerial degree, or maybe even two...

So here we were, huddled together by the notice board, scrutinising the rector's instructions. We, the final year students, were now expected to form groups of three, comprising a script writer, director, and cameraman. Well, this bit was easy: I'd write the script, Taras Paliy would operate the camera and as for a director – we'd find someone in our year...

On the whole, nothing new, everything according to the age-old tradition of our institution: a decent writer must come up with such a script as to have it approved by the head of the workshop. The director has to formulate his vision and plan the blocking. The cameraman was expected to offer various angles and winning approaches. And all of this for the sake of a short film, some 20-25 minutes-long, for such was the allotted length. In short, you then would be expected to defend it in front of the graduation committee which represents the apotheosis of the whole undertaking.

To tell the truth, I'd never considered myself a productive script writer: barely scraped together two complete scripts in four years. Whereas the 'seasoned' ones could've scored as many as ten per person! On the other hand, not even one script out of this voluminous output was ever in demand... But it did sound good – ten pieces to your name! Not like my pathetic two...

However, even I got my portion of infrequent praise. The overall opinion was that although my scripts were nothing special as such, but they brimmed with some creative schticks...

All of this was true. Pity, though, that at that stage I didn't have a single decent idea. Not even a shred...

He's an Odd One, this Putin...

The situation around us was full of anxiety – both outside or within the country. On the external parameter Russia continued to draw in her troops. The Americans were sharing their satellite images and warning us of danger.

But as for us, the prevailing intent was to keep calm. Even if the parliament and media were more boisterous than ever. President Zelensky had been onto Medvedchuk – an openly pro-Russian leader popularly referred to as 'Mertvechuk'. Nothing funny about any of this: the potential charge was treason! Even abetting terrorism! My, oh my...

The court ruled that while the hearing was going on the defendant should stay under house arrest: a bracelet on his hand enabling them to follow his movements. In short, to prevent him fleeing...

'Urgh!' grimaced Spyridon. 'I really don't like any of it. This Putin here, he knows how to bear a grudge, he'll never forgive it... He's sure to pay back in kind... Putin is Medvedchuk's daughter's godfather, so it's no trifle. They are truly connected. Putin had been placing a serious stake on him all the way until 2014. He advised Yanukovych to appoint him Prime Minister. He

¹⁵ **Mertvechuk**: a play on a similarity of pronunciation. *Medvedchuk* refers to Medved (*Vedmed*, in Ukrainian), a bear; *Mertvechuk* invokes the word *smert*, death.

used to say: "So here, Vyktor Medvedchuk – who better as a Prime Minister for Ukraine"?'

'Whatever the past,' that from Taras, 'he and his beauty Oksana Marchenko are probably quite comfortable in this palace of theirs... And the bracelet is clearly not going to be in the way...'

'Just look at him – such a common mug, somewhat repulsive, even...' I put in my tiny dig, too. 'Yet he scored himself a TV presenter for a wife, pretty as a model...'

'Dough, dude... that's what rules the world...' Bolik clasped his fingers expressively. 'He may well have been repugnant to her too, that's to start with. Then he bought her, and got attractive...'

'Enough, guys,' Alla sounded indignant. 'Some connoisseurs of the woman's heart you are!'

Well, Medvedchuk – that was just to get the ball rolling. The conversation promptly moved on to the topical developments.

'Putin places his bet on provoking immediate chaos here...' Spyridon added fuel to the fire. 'Sort of, it'll all "blow up from within"! And when the situation spirals out of control, a new Maidan will flare up! 16 And this time they'll be in the right place at the right time. They'll bring in their army – what else? – to liberate their "compatriots". Of whom there's probably 10-15 percent left here...'

'It's clear now, of course, why they kept pushing their insane plan forward so brazenly! One people, my ass!' Arkady was getting all steamed up. 'No, guys, the thesis of liberating compatriots is clearly wobbly. They'll need a new pretext for aggression now. We, allegedly, are "one people"? But Ukraine, as part of this integral unity, has always been presented as a captive of Bandera toadies! And they'll barge in to defend not just some miserable part but the whole unity...'

'Look, it's all true, 'Bolik flung up his hands. 'But it's simply not possible that there aren't people in Russia opposed to those insane ideas...'

'You're talking about the so-called "good Russians"?' Liubchik was amazed. 'Do you believe that they even exist?'

Maidan: the so-called 'Second Maidan' (or Euro-Maidan) was a wave of demonstrations and civil unrest in Ukraine which began on 21 November 2013 with large protests on Independence Square (Maidan Nezalezhnosti) in Kyiv. The protests were sparked by President Yanukovich's sudden decision not to sign the European Union-Ukraine Association Agreement, instead choosing closer ties to Russia and the Eurasian Economic Union. The First Maidan (Orange Revolution) took place in November 2004 – January 2005 in response to huge falsifications in the 2004 presidential election.

¹⁷ **Stepan Bandera** (1909-1959): a Ukrainian political activist, revolutionary, one of the radical leading ideologists, practitioners and theoreticians of the Ukrainian nationalist movement in the 20th century. Was assassinated in 1959 in Munich by a Russian KBG agent.

'Recall, Bolik, the end of August of 2014: our forces went on the offensive near Ilovaisk, thus practically solving the problem of liberating Donbas...' Taras extended his hand towards him. 'But Russians promptly moved in: started launching missile attacks from their territory, and brought new forces into the battle zone. That was the decisive factor – our guys got trapped... During some complex talks the Russian side guaranteed the Ukrainian troops safe passage out of the encirclement. Putin personally suggested setting up a "green corridor". And then what? You know yourself: the Russian artillery shelled this celebrated "green corridor" to bits...'

'They gave "the word of an officer"!' Arkady flew into a rage. 'Better still—it was a general! The personal word of the bloody Russky president!'

'I'll tell you what,' Liubchik joined our exchange. 'Don't you know what the "good Russians" are calling the events of 2014? All of it: Crimea, Donbas, and specifically Ilovaisk? Let me remind you... They are saying it was a tiff between two peoples. Nothing more!'

'And it's the "good Russians" saying this.' Spyridon sounded really angry. 'Of which there is a minority. To say nothing about the "bad Russians" who are definitely more numerous... Goodness gracious...'

We all fell momentarily silent, it felt so painful.

'I was listening to some boffins on telly yesterday. They envisage the entire Left Bank being conquered within a week, all the way to the Dnipro... They give Kyiv no more than two or three days...'

'I heard it too. One of those talking heads says something else, though: they may well advance so far. But what will they do afterwards? We've got a short fuse, that's for sure! Besides, people got much more switched on lately. Getting in is probably possible but getting out? Even if our army won't succeed straight away, some civilians will join the partisans. They may arrange them a proper "welcome"!'

'God save us from any of it... That's totally absurd... yesterday sort of brothers but today – enemies? It's true when they say this Putin of theirs is a monster.'

'Pity no one can get inside his head... Why is it: they're armed up to their eyeballs yet militarism is blasting forth! And we should give it all a proper thought...'

'The way I see it, he's made some grievous mistakes. For example, he believes that the issue of Crimea has been closed. From his point of view, that's how it is. Pity the European Union is way too cautious: verbally it's one story, but in reality they're weaving and bobbing. Thing is, politics is all well and good but there're some serious business interests involved. And what does it all mean to the US and UK, the signatories to the Budapest Memorandum?¹⁸ It's a different

¹⁸ The **Budapest Memorandum** of Security Assurances (in Ukrainian and Russian

deal altogether. Their reputation has taken quite a blow. Now go and try to curb any country's ambitions if they try to create nuclear weapons. And those who already have it, try and keep them from piling it up... They would answer back: "Look at what happened to Ukraine? Some serious papers got signed. And then a lot of zilch and fizzle. And we don't want anything like it to happen to us too. So let us work at our nuclear programmes. And leave us be, save your admonishments." Don't you see? After this Russian escapade, it'll be much harder to control the nuclear stuff! If at all possible...'

'So why are they dragging their feet, the US and UK?'

'They are smart. Waiting it all out. Hoping that the colossus does sit on the legs of clay, and will eventually crumble...'

'What's there to mull over? He really sucks. He's something from the last century, a product of the rotten Soviet system...'

Unexpectedly Alla raised her hand, calling us to attention.

'Look, guys... I'd like to remind you of something ... Remember how our Zelensky came to power?'

'Sure. His main election promise was peace with Russia! He said: for the sake of that, I'll speak with the devil himself!'

'Me too, I remember... After he was elected, his entire team genuinely believed in the possibility of reconciliation with Russia. They were even saying that his abilities as an actor would help! A dialogue was indeed started. Zelensky made calls, met Putin in Paris, there were large-scale exchanges of prisoners of war. But... simpletons they were... Didn't they take into account the fact that the Kremlin guy is a stubborn maximalist. Who wanted everything for himself... Well, now what? Having had their chips?'

Alla raised her hand again.

'Still, I've had this idea. Perhaps, it's silly...'

We all froze for a moment.

'This here Putin...' she carried on. 'Isn't he, sort of...'

She fell silent and said nothing for a bit.

'Well? What? Do go on!'

'What idea?'

"... err, how shall I put it... could it be... that he's a Devil of some sort?"

texts: guarantees) was signed in Budapest, Hungary on 5 December 1994, to provide security assurances/guarantees by its signatories relating to the accession of Ukraine (as well as Belarus and Kazakhstan) to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. Under the memorandum Ukraine renounced its nuclear status; nuclear weapons were either neutralized or transferred to the Russian Federation. [The bomb was (most of all, intentionally) set in the inconsistency of these assurances/guarantees].

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'Whoa! Hold your horses...' Arkady sounded worried. 'Wait a minute... Now, to cast such aspersions...'

'Put on the brakes yourself...' Taras looked taken aback. 'Perhaps... perhaps there's something there? They do say that some weird rites are practised in the Kremlin... And they also invite witch doctors...'

'Come on, who can say it for certain, apart from him personally?' Spyridon's forehead glistened with sweat. 'He may well be the Evil One ... Interesting thought though, must chew it over...'

'What's there to chew?' Bolik visibly cheered up. 'He really is a Devil! Hundred percent true!'

'Dear Christ, give me strength, 'Arkady screwed up his face. 'You are sure to drive me nuts. The mere train of thought is weird. We are supposed to be educated young people! It's 21-st century out there, not some Middle Ages, yet we are blabbering about some evil spirits. It's ludicrous!'

'Yeah... it does sound weird, that's true...' Clearly, Bolik had already made an about-face.

'I know why things like this come to head...' chuckled Spyridon. 'All it is, is some spine-shattering discrepancy. He looks one way on TV – like what we all say, cool beyond all measure, every bit a global leader. Yet his head is full of all sorts of bizarre ideas and weird stuff. It's well known that he's obsessed with his health and jumping out of his skin to fight the old age. Just imagine how many laps he puts in daily in his swimming pool! It does tell us a story...'

We all stopped dead.

'Well? For example?'

'What I'm saying is that he's not quite sane... I hear that there are some seriously funny things going on in his inner circles. So, what, then? Ok, a person's got his mentality slightly out of sync, it doesn't mean, not really, that one can ascribe all sorts of silly things to him... What you now call "Devil" invokes popular mythology, nothing else... A person displays some psychological deviations – trifles, given his age – and you are slapping all sorts of labels onto him!'

We silently tried to take it all on board.

'Hey! I've got an idea!' Taras perked up. 'It was our rector who first started it. And so it got lodged in the subconscious. Forgot the optional course he delivered at the beginning of the year on Gogol's early output?¹⁹ How he first found fame? How he first arrived in this cold unwelcoming St Petersburg and found it revolting? And kept thinking about his native land? Ukraine... The land of luxurious gardens, young beauties, dashing lads and wonderful songs... But...

¹⁹ **Nikolai Gogol** (1809-1852): a Russian novelist, short story writer, and playwright of Ukrainian origin.

Hello, dear audience of St Petersburg! In this Ukraine, there also exist forest elves, house spirits and mermaids... More than that – all kinds of evil forces! So let me inundate you with all this stuff, esteemed aristocracy! Scary tales and legends – I'll give you an earful! And so he set off, flogging this subject... He kept begging with his mother in each letter: give me, give me yet another legend! So that they'll all tremble with fear all over this Petersburg!'

'Hmm... Quite possible that it was our rector who planted this seed...' Alla was deep in thought.

'Look! I'm sick and tired of all this drivel!' Arkady, by now, was thoroughly annoyed. 'Gogol... Scary tales... legends... If you talk of Gogol, stay on what he did write about. What does a devil look in Gogol's tales? Sports little horns, a goatee, a snout of a nose and spindly legs with hooves... Is it all coming back? Meanwhile the one you are trying to label here – what does he look like? Let me refresh your memory: he prefers Italian brands, suits from Brioni, ties from Valentino or Moschino... That's it, fuck it. I've had it with you...'

'Wow, that's some angle...' Liubchik gave her fringe a shake. 'What do'ye say, Stinger? Why don't you say something?'

'What's to say?' I tried to remove myself from the fray.

Normally, I tried to stay away from political discussions. Yet now... And whether or not someone is... a Devil? Total bonkers... Although... Perhaps Spyridon had a point when he insisted that it deserved thinking over?

In short, I just waved dismissively – get lost. Stop all this nonsense. Your discussion is getting really weird...

Arkady was clearly overjoyed to find an ally in me. He, too, brought his hand down forcibly:

'All this is ancient superstitions. What evil forces? They don't even exist... And overall, we're heading in some funny direction... We've had some fun, and that's it. The subject is closed!'

And we all stopped talking. Stood around for a while and then went our separate ways...

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