

## *Foreword to the English Edition*

It hurts to be Russian.

When Vladimir Putin launched his ‘special military operation’ in Ukraine, he claimed that its aim was to save the Russians, Russian culture and the Russian language from Ukrainian fascists. In the process, it is predominantly the Russian-speaking cities in the east of the country, together with their populations, that have been wiped out. War crimes have been committed not only against people, but also against my language. The language of Alexander Pushkin and Leo Tolstoy, Marina Tsvetaeva and Joseph Brodsky has become the language of war criminals and murderers. For the foreseeable future, Russia will be associated not with Russian music and literature, but with bombs dropping on children and those terrible images from Bucha.

Moreover, the regime’s criminal actions taint the whole of

the country. Monstrous crimes have been committed in the name of my people, my country, in my name. But there is another Russia. That other Russia is suffering pain and anguish. In the name of my Russia, in the name of my people, I would like to ask the Ukrainians for forgiveness – but I know that what has been happening in Ukraine is unforgivable.

When my father was eighteen, he went to the front to avenge his brother's murder at the hands of the Germans. After the war, he spent the rest of his life hating the Germans, and everything to do with the country. I told him, 'But Dad, Germany has some great literature! German is a beautiful language!' But my words had no effect on him. When this war is over, what will I be able to say to the Ukrainians, whose houses have been bombed and plundered by Russian soldiers, whose relatives have been killed by Russian missiles? That Russian literature is wonderful, and that Russian is such a beautiful language?

When war starts, culture has failed. Great German literature couldn't avert Auschwitz, great Russian literature couldn't prevent the Gulag, and my books and those of other Russian authors published in the past twenty years couldn't avert this tragedy.

So what can writers do? They can do what they do best – make themselves heard. They must tell it like it is. If you say nothing, you're effectively supporting the aggressor and the war. In the nineteenth century, the Poles fought against tsarist Russia 'for your and our freedom', and now the Ukrainians are fighting for your and our freedom. They are defending not only

their human dignity, but the dignity of all humankind. Ukraine is defending our very freedom and dignity, and we must help in any way we can.

My mother was Ukrainian and my father was Russian; I can't help but be glad that they're not around to experience the tragedy that has hit our people.

This war hasn't only just begun. It began in 2014 – but the Western world refused to see it, and acted as if things weren't all that bad. In the intervening years, I've kept trying to explain to people who this Putin is, in my writings as well as in public appearances. It didn't work. Now Putin has explained it himself.

These chapters were originally published in German in 2019 (as part of *Frieden oder Krieg*, which included separate chapters written by the veteran TV journalist Fritz Pleitgen). As relevant as they were then, they are becoming more so each day, and the future I predict in the final chapters – what lies in store for Russia and for the rest of the world – has become our present. Back then, I wrote this:

The glorious recovery of Crimea already has its own chapter in [Russian] school textbooks, and the next chapter waiting in the wings will tell the story of how Kyiv crawled on its knees back into the arms of the Russian world, like the prodigal son . . . the Kremlin will keep stoking the conflict in Donbas; sometimes it'll let it die down a little, sometimes it'll add fresh fuel to it . . . Putin will never give in.

On 24 February 2022, Russia's patience ran out. The Kremlin decided not to wait for Kyiv to come crawling back of its own accord. Since that day, the world has become a different place. The West has woken up. It has expanded what I described as the 'half-baked sanctions' that were in place in 2019, and banned, or substantially banned, Russian oil and gas imports; it has excluded Russian banks from SWIFT; in 2019, NATO was considering further expansion and thinking of admitting Finland and Sweden – as a result of this year's events, the two countries are in fact close to joining (at the time of writing, only Turkey and Hungary are yet to ratify their membership). Yet the West still finds Russia inexplicable and disconcerting, and the purpose of my book remains unchanged: I want to disclose my country to Western readers, to explain Russia and its past, present and future. It is also a love letter to my country, which is blessed with stunning nature and wonderful culture, yet keeps turning into a monster that devours its own and other countries' children.

The aim of Russia's 'special military operation' is to destroy democratic Ukraine. The result of the 'special military operation' will be the destruction of Putin's Russia. But what then?

Two previous attempts to introduce democracy in Russia have both failed. The first Russian democracy of 1917 lasted only a few months; the one of the 1990s just managed to cling on for a few years. Each time my country tries to build a democratic society and to institute elections, a parliament and

a republic, it finds itself back in a totalitarian empire. Again and again, Russian history bites its own tail.

Do dictatorships and dictators give birth to an enslaved population, or does an enslaved population give birth to dictatorships and dictators? It's the old chicken-and-egg conundrum. How can the vicious circle be broken? Where can Russia make a fresh start?

If Hitler's Germany was able to extricate itself from the vicious circle of dictatorship and slave mentality, why shouldn't Russia? The Germans have diligently studied the topics 'Dealing with the Past' and 'Processing Guilt', and managed to create a democratic society; yet Germany's rebirth was founded on its total, crushing military defeat. Russia, too, needs its zero hour. It cannot make a fresh start as a democracy without repentance and an acknowledgement of national guilt.

Russia was never de-Stalinised, and there were no Nuremberg trials for the Communist Party. Russia's fate now depends on its de-Putinisation. Just as, in 1945, the Germans who 'didn't know' were confronted with the concentration camps, the Russians who 'don't know' have to be confronted with ruined Ukrainian cities and the bodies of dead children. We Russians must openly and bravely acknowledge our guilt and ask for forgiveness. Every Russian has to go down this road. But will Russia get down on its knees in Kyiv, Kharkiv and Mariupol, or anywhere that Russian tanks have been: in Budapest, Prague, Tallinn, Vilnius, Riga, Grozny?

In 1945, the Germans tried to justify themselves, arguing

that, yes, Hitler was a vile and evil criminal, but they, the German people, didn't know anything about it – that they, too, were Hitler's victims. The moment the Russians use the same argument, and claim that Putin's criminal gang took the people hostage, that he did wage a criminal war against Ukraine, but ordinary Russians didn't know that and thought it was about liberating the Ukrainians from fascists, that they, too, were Putin's victims – the moment this happens, de-Putinisation will fail, and a new Putin will be born.

Neither NATO nor the Ukrainians can do the de-Putinising for the Russians. The Russian people must clean up the country themselves. Are we up to the task? Is it realistic to expect constitutional democracies to form in those territories that will declare their independence from Moscow – since the disintegration of the Russian empire isn't over yet? Yugoslavia showed how quickly a multinational state can descend into brutal war and genocide, and if violence escalates in Russia it will set my country back centuries. For the West, this would mean a fresh wave of countless refugees.

A new era of turmoil is on the horizon for Russia, where most people have lost faith in democratic ideas and are pinning their hopes on a strongman ruler. Such a strongman will no doubt be found, and the West, too, will understand and accept a new 'dictatorship of order'. No one wants turmoil in a country that has lots of rusty nuclear missiles.

This is my credo: there must be an acknowledgement of national guilt. Without complete de-Putinisation, Russia has no

future. A long and painful process of rebirth is its only option, and all those sanctions, the poverty, being ostracised, will be the least of Russia's worries. For the Russian people not to undergo an inner rebirth – that would be far more terrible. Putin is a symptom, not the disease.

It should now be the mission of Russian writers and artists to show the world that there is another Russia, and that not all Russians support this war. This war isn't being waged between Ukrainians and Russians, but between human beings who speak both Ukrainian and Russian on the one hand, and inhuman beings who speak the language of lies and are willing to obey criminal orders on the other. In this war, then, there are no nationalities – only human beings and inhuman ones. The latter have no nationality, because they are this criminal regime's slaves, who beat up and arrest the humans who are taking to Russia's streets to protest against the war.

Putin's crime is that he has poisoned the people with hate. Putin will step down at some point, but the pain and hate will probably remain in their souls for a long time. Then it will be up to culture, to literature and the arts, to process the trauma. The day a dictator ends his miserable, unworthy life, doesn't mark the end of culture – it never has and never will. There will be no need for books about Putin or books that explain the war: war, someone ordering the people of one nation to kill those of another, cannot be explained. True literature defies war. True literature is about our need for love, not hate.

A reader once told me, 'Your book prevented my love for

Russia from suffocating in the blood of the Ukrainians.’ The Russian army’s invasion of Ukraine has caused so much bloodshed – can a book still prevent anyone’s love for Russia from drowning in all that blood?

After war comes anti-war literature. Just like Ernest Hemingway and Erich Maria Remarque once, I have no doubt that there will be young authors writing about their experiences in this war. Both Russians and Ukrainians will write books, and they’ll be very different books. Both will write about the pain that loss brings, about death, about grief; but while Ukrainian literature will see books on the birth of a free country, the heroic resistance against evil and the fight for human dignity, Russian authors will be preoccupied with the acknowledgement of national guilt for the crimes that have been committed.

Hate is a disease. Culture is the cure.