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When art is all that remains

Before politicians can even articulate their agenda or intentions, art will have already revealed all. Unlike politics, authentic culture never lies

Early in this century, I was told, the United Kingdom compiled a list of the ten most important actions to take in the event of an emergency. One was to save the renowned Titian paintings housed at the National Gallery. Just imagine if masterpieces like *Noli me tangere* (1514) and *An Allegory of Prudence* (*c.*1550-65) were to suffer the same fate (looting by thieves) as the treasures of the Iraq National Museum in Baghdad after the US invasion in 2003.

The UK government's concern for the safety of Titian's paintings refutes the claim that high art is dead. Classic paintings might seem meaningless in a world that is drowning in triviality and 'content', because in peacetime, we can afford to be distracted. But war changes the equation. When a country or nation cherishes its cultural individuality as much as its territory, natural resources, or financial institutions, art can become a battleground. Consider Ukraine's 'anti-Pushkin law', named after the nineteenth-century Russian poet Alexander Pushkin. Adopted last year, it allows for the removal or destruction of cultural monuments related to Russian and Soviet history. Numerous works of art – including paintings, sculptures and books by Russian artists – have been banned or destroyed as symbols of an imperial, totalitarian ideology. But, to borrow Talleyrand's quip about Napoleon executing the Duc d'Enghien, summarily 'cancelling' another nation or ethnic group's cultural artefacts is worse than a crime; it is a mistake.

The true, unrivalled power of art

Of course, with Russian armies ravaging Ukraine, no Russian should dare tell Ukrainians how to address their past or construct their future. My heart is filled with sorrow for the deaths and suffering that soldiers from my homeland have inflicted on Ukraine. I would love to be able to apologise to the Ukrainian people on behalf of the Russian nation. At the same time, I am not alone in questioning the wisdom of cultural

cancellation. In 1955, at the height of the Cold War, George F. Kennan, one of America's greatest diplomats, gave an address at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. '[I]n the creation of beauty and in the great monumental works of the intellect, and there alone', he observed, 'human beings have been able to find an unfailing bridge between nations, even in the darkest moments of political bitterness and chauvinism and exclusiveness.' Crises reveal the true, unrivalled power of art.

But why is this so? Unlike politics, authentic culture never lies. Before politicians can even articulate their agenda or true intentions, art often will have already revealed all. In 2006, the Russian author Vladimir Sorokin published a short novel, *Day of the Oprichnik*, in which czardom has returned and government henchmen are in charge. At the time, we dismissed it as pure fiction — an absurd dystopia. Today, it is Russia's reality. Vladimir Putin held his fifth presidential inauguration this past May, and independent thought is now violently punished.

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Similarly, George Orwell's dystopian fiction is regarded in Russia today as a survival manual. Visiting a St. Petersburg bookstore last year, I was struck by a prominent window display of *1984*. 'We have to remember which world we are living in', the shopkeeper remarked.

In 1947, Kennan wrote a now-famous commentary for *Foreign Affairs* about what he called 'the sources of Soviet conduct.' Adopting the same approach, we can trace Russian conduct today back to Fyodor Dostoyevsky. In an 1873 letter to the future Emperor Alexander III, the Russian novelist wrote, 'Great nations who have manifested … their great powers – those that have brought … if only a single ray of light into the world – succeeded because they have remained … presumptuously independent.' Putin sees what he wants to see in such rhetoric: as a 'sovereign civilisation', Russia acts as it must.

If Putin were a better student, he would have understood that Dostoyevsky's call for national independence was driven not by a desire for power, but by a conviction that each country's unique contribution adds value to the world. But Putin has no interest in such messages. He insists that he is following an imperial legacy that was set forward by

many great artists in the past. This connection between politics and culture runs deep. As I wrote in June 2022, 'Refusing to engage with Russian culture will not change Putin's calculations or force him to withdraw his forces from Ukraine. What it will do is cut off a potential source of information about his objectives and motivations.'

The role of art when there is no freedom

The late Russian dissident philosopher Andrei Sinyavsky (known more generally by his pseudonym Abram Tertz) spent most of the 1960s in a Soviet labour camp for criticising the communist state. In his memoir, *A Voice from the Chorus* (1974), he described a prisoner's love for art: '[L]istening to a Beethoven record – the sort of modest thing we do on Sundays as earnestly as free people going to concerts ... because here things in short supply... are all the more appreciated and valued as a result ... things ... once common ... have suddenly become precious ...'

Art always matters, but it matters even more when freedom has disappeared. Before the collapse of communism, the American author Philip Roth observed the difference between being a novelist in the free West and being a novelist behind the censoring Iron Curtain: '[In Eastern Europe] nothing goes and everything matters; here everything goes and nothing matters.' It's true. People in Russia, the centre of the communist empire behind the Iron Curtain, saw culture differently than people in the West. Culture was our liberty. It was an escape — a glimpse of the spiritual, if not physical, freedom denied by the Soviet system.

The renowned Polish journalist Adam Michnik, one of the leaders of the anti-authoritarian Solidarity movement in the 1980s, studied Russian in prison in order to read Leo Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky in their native tongue. He described it as one of the greatest experiences of his life. While he escaped into their imagined worlds, they also influenced and shaped his understanding of how better to fight his communist jailers. In 1985, Michnik wrote *Letter from Gdańsk Prison*, explaining how repression leads tyrannical governments into a blind alley of self-destruction. The Iron Curtain fell a few years later.

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Now, history in Eastern Europe is rhyming. At this year's Salzburg Festival, tickets to a reading of Alexei Navalny's letters from prison quickly sold out. His letters, like those written by Michnik, are literary windows on life in captivity. Navalny, like the political prisoners of earlier generations, depicted humanity's condition under oppression and crisis. In his

universal truth, not a Russian truth.

1862 book, *The House of the Dead*, Dostoyevsky described living in a Siberian labour camp for five years as punishment for his association with a political group opposing Czar Nicholas I. In his 1962 book, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich,* Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote of his experiences in Stalin's Gulag, where he spent almost ten years. And in her 1967 book, *Journey into the Whirlwind,* Eugenia Ginzburg detailed her time, during the 1930s, in the Magadan prison camp, near the Arctic Circle.

These works attest to art's power not only to document oppression, but also to offer a path to survival. They show us how to endure without losing our own humanity. Through some sort of alchemy, a work of art – be it a painting or sculpture, a symphony or opera, a novel or poem – can reflect the best in us. In Russia, pain is perennial and existential. It makes for bad living, but it also creates the conditions for masterpieces. This is a universal truth, not a Russian truth. The lives and art of Beethoven, Vincent van Gogh, Sergei Prokofiev, Dmitri Shostakovich, James Baldwin, and Jamaica Kincaid are all part of the same phenomenon. The greatest art, the work most worth preserving, grows out of pain in all contexts and on all continents.

Art saves the world

To its credit, the Salzburg Festival chose to highlight two pieces of Russian music, by Prokofiev and Alfred Schnittke. This was a brave choice, given the current trend of rejecting works of art simply for being created by Russians. The festival also featured not one but two operatic productions of Dostoyevsky's writings: *The Idiot* and *The Gambler*, with the program highlighting a line from *The Idiot*: 'Compassion is the only law of mankind.' In the same novel, Dostoyevsky avers, 'The world will be saved by beauty.'

Art saves the world every day, in every century, and for every generation. It will be what is left of us when we are gone. Though Ecclesiastes reminds us that there is nothing new under the sun, we nevertheless struggle to overcome the most frustrating and most life-affirming quality of creativity — its incompletion. As long as people live, some will pursue masterpieces, manifesting the indomitable, creative human spirit that ultimately ensures our survival. Consider Vladimir Nabokov, a twentieth-century Russian writer who became a classic American one. In exile from his motherland, he rewrote many pieces of tragic Russian literature – including works by Anton Chekhov, Tolstoy, and

Dostoyevsky – in a happier key. Most Russian narratives are about an unjust society in which people perpetually ready themselves for death, so Nabokov freed classical Russian characters by giving them a new life where suffering was no longer the norm.

Culturally, Russia is largely the offspring of Western Europe.

Recall the famous opening of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1877): 'All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.' In *Ada, or Ardor* (1969), Nabokov turns this upside down, 'All happy families are more or less dissimilar, all unhappy ones are more or less alike.' These Russian examples are instructive, given the country's geopolitical schizophrenia. It is both European and not European at all. Its imperial, dictatorial, Byzantine political structure is outdated and ossified. Yet, culturally, Russia is largely the offspring of Western Europe. Pushkin's own writing was an amalgamation of Russian themes and French poetic techniques. Nikolai Gogol, a Russian writer of Ukrainian origin, composed satirical masterpieces that drew on stories by German Romantics such as E.T.A. Hoffmann. Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1869) was composed partly in French.

The Kremlin's war against Russian culture

Art cannot prevent tyranny or war, but it can debunk their pretexts. Even when most people in Russia feel that they cannot fight despotism, Russian art never remains neutral. It always fights for a better society, a better humanity and beauty.

If Putin and his Kremlin cronies had learned the lessons that art has taught about past dictatorships, Russia might have been spared from its current plight. But most rulers are poor students. They do not appreciate culture and creativity because they view it as a threat, a form of critical public accountability. Otherwise, Stalin and Putin would not have destroyed masterpieces and imprisoned artists.

While I object to Ukraine's destruction and prohibition of Russian art, I also recognise that the Kremlin is even more at war with Russian culture. Any artist or intellectual who does not support Putin's bellicose policies

is silenced. Despots love only *kulturka* ('abridged culture') that references their own greatness, but the best of Russian art is the antithesis of this. Drawing on universal experiences of injustice, it proves that oppression and confrontation invariably fail.

In the twenty-first century, Russian artists continue the tradition of calling out totalitarian cruelty.

In the 1930s, Anna Akhmatova angered Stalin by writing 'Requiem', a prophetic poem about her and her contemporaries' resolve to outlast the dictator's rule. Several decades later, Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* (1973) had a greater role in bringing about the moral collapse of communism than most politicians of the late Soviet era.

In the twenty-first century, Russian artists continue the tradition of calling out totalitarian cruelty. In her 2013 oral history, *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets*, the Ukraine-born, Belarus-based Nobel Prize-winning author Svetlana Alexievich described the physical and spiritual scars borne from authoritarianism before and after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s.

Looking at the Kremlin today, one wonders, 'Do they really not know how this story ends?' Art will always have the last word.

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