

GUEST ESSAY

Russia Has Suffered a Crushing Moral Defeat. And Russians Know It.

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MOSCOW — Shock and shame.

That's the response of many Russians to the sight of rockets and artillery shells hitting Ukrainian tower blocks that in their concrete uniformity could easily be in Moscow. The towns through which Russian armored vehicles are rolling, captured in shaky videos and accompanied by howls of horror, could be Voronezh or Krasnodar or any Russian city. The invasion of Ukraine is a waking nightmare, horrible and absurd.

And it's being done in our name. Feb. 24, when President Vladimir Putin announced the invasion, is the day Russia became an outcast, despised nation, not just economically isolated but actively shunned by the rest of the world — in sports, science and most other kinds of international cooperation. Whatever military “victory” Mr. Putin might find acceptable in his twisted mind, Russia has already suffered a crushing moral defeat.

And to a certain extent, it seems like the Russian people know it. Though dissent has been effectively outlawed, thousands of people have taken the risk to express their opposition to the invasion. And it's not just the usual suspects, the malcontents already known to the Kremlin. Major public figures, prominent journalists and artists have spoken out against the war.

We may be far from a large-scale antiwar movement, but the seeds have been sown. And once they flower into outright defiance, it could spell trouble for Mr. Putin.

For many of us, the horror is visceral and personal. My uncle, for example, is Ukrainian and my wife's grandmother, born in the Ukrainian city of Vinnytsia, survived the Nazi occupation of Kyiv. It's hard to find a Russian family without Ukrainian relatives and friends, husbands and wives, girlfriends and boyfriends, chess partners and colleagues. Many of them are now hiding in bomb shelters in Kyiv and Kharkiv.

They're under attack by a Russian Army whose soldiers — young men who have spent their entire lives under Mr. Putin — look forlorn and confused. They were told by their commanders that they were going to the Ukrainian border to take part in logistical drills, only to find themselves at war. Mr. Putin seemingly dreamed of a quick victory with Russian-speaking Ukrainians welcoming their “liberators” with flowers, the Ukrainian Army surrendering en masse and the country's leaders fleeing in fear. None of this is happening.

Instead, as the Ukrainians bravely resist the onslaught, Russians are feeling the pain of wide-ranging international sanctions and reprisals. With no European Union country accepting flights from Russia and America closing its airspace, thousands have been left scrambling in airports — while others wait in long lines at A.T.M.s as the ruble plunges. For ordinary Russians, poorer and cut off from the world, the costs of Mr. Putin's aggression will be high.

State propaganda is baying hysterically, doing its best to rally people behind the war — even while refusing to call it that. In fact, the censorship ministry is punishing those few remaining independent media organizations, including Meduza, where I work, that dare to call Russia's war what it is. On Tuesday, the government took Echo of Moscow and TV Rain, the last remaining independent radio station and TV channel, off the air. Demands to punish the “fifth columnists” and “traitors” — in effect those who sympathize with Ukraine — are growing louder and louder. Political repression will surely intensify.

The Kremlin would like to suggest that most Russians are unconcerned about the misery already ricocheting their way. According to a state-owned pollster, 68 percent of citizens support the war. But there's a big caveat: The survey never mentioned war at all. Instead, it asked people whether they support what the government calls a “special military

operation,” aimed among other things at “preventing a NATO base in Ukraine” and “denazification of Ukraine.” What the poll really shows is how state media dominates public opinion.

But it can’t completely squash dissenting views. In the past week, thousands of people across the country have taken to the streets in protest against the war. On the day of the invasion, a throng of protesters gathered in St. Petersburg, Mr. Putin’s hometown, chanting peace slogans while surrounded by police vehicles. Given the risks involved — nearly 7,000 people have been detained, in 13 cities — it’s an impressive showing. Not since 1999, when Russians came out to support Yugoslavia during NATO’s bombing campaign, have there been such sustained antiwar protests in the country.

Others are pursuing subtler forms of protest in the hope they won’t result in immediate arrest. Some are covering Moscow’s walls with the simple, straightforward call: “No to war.” (The messages are scrubbed away by officials, only to reappear overnight.) Others are laying flowers on the Kyiv monument near Red Square, which commemorates the bravery of its defenders in World War II.

Beyond the streets, people are busy too. A petition condemning the war has already received more than a million signatures, and architects, medical workers, university students and even priests in the normally acquiescent Russian Orthodox Church are signing open letters demanding that it stop immediately. Big names like Yuri Dud, Russia’s most prominent video blogger, the popular singer Valery Meladze and even several State Duma members and top oligarchs have publicly spoken out in an unlikely chorus of voices.

A mass antiwar movement is still a way off. But these are, amid the gloom, promising signs. As the country continues to bomb and terrify Ukraine, more and more Russians may wake up to something only a few dare to say publicly: That Mr. Putin is an existential danger not only to themselves but also to the world. And he must be stopped.

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