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Reflection on Ukraine in the mind of Americans

The War in Ukraine was brought about by a power-hungry pseudo-president in Russia who is eager to reclaim his country's lost glory. The importance of this conflict is not just in its exposure of Putin's irredentist intentions and genocidal rhetoric through blatantly attempting to undermine a democratically elected government of free people, but in the challenges poses for the modern international order.

My understanding is that the war started with the 2014 takeover of Crimea by Russia and the invasion of the Donbas region of Eastern Ukraine by Russian proxies.

That war represented the first sign of cracks in the new international order but was not a full-scale invasion. Rather, this followed the Cold War trend of masking attempts to meddle in foreign affairs through covert operations, supporting illegitimate rebel movements, and sporadic bombing campaigns – all actions the United States is equally guilty of.

But the 2022 invasion has destroyed this veil, first through the action of Russian troops directly marching into Ukraine and launching air assaults on Ukrainian cities, and later through Putin's acknowledgment, as he recently dropped the "special military operation" classification and no longer denies that Russia is at war.

When it comes to the Americans and the United States in general, it is hard to speak about the position on the war in Ukraine because America occupies such a weird place in the international order.

To illustrate this, it is easy for someone in Eastern Europe to empathize with Ukrainians because of their proximity to the conflict and the realization that they could be next.

The difference is that Americans live in the supposed most powerful country on earth, all the way across the Atlantic, and thus lack fear of knowing that they could be next. The effect is that a physical distance between America and conflict zones is also reflected in a certain dissociation from such conflicts in the minds of Americans.

This creates a deciding factor that I believe shapes the minds of Americans and their ability to empathize with the victims of aggression.

To further illustrate this, consider that brutal wars, occupations, and human rights atrocities exist in no shortage across the world, with cases like Ukraine having been going on for years with extensive coverage.

I would argue most Americans are aware of at least one of these conflicts, but it is one thing to hear about the constant bombardments facing Ukraine and decide that the war is bad, and another to witness the testimonies of Ukrainians who have been displaced due to the war and have friends or peers fighting on the front lines, willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for their country.

That is why meeting with Ukrainian students was so important, because of how easy it was for college students' stories to resonate with other college students, who now recognize the privilege of proper education and peaceful existence.

Furthermore, having their words, experiences, stories, and hardships placed before us generated a genuine human feeling of connection and an understanding that by ignoring this conflict America is complicit in the destruction of Ukraine's way of life. It is only unfortunate that the meeting was isolated to a single class, as it is this empathetic understanding that unfortunately, many Americans lack.

The attitudes of Americans should not be misunderstood as a lack of access to information about the war in Ukraine, as there have been no shortages of coverage from various news organizations in America. However, the average American does not actively seek out a proper understanding of these global issues without having a personal or professional motivation, instead receiving updates on politics passively through what their newsfeed presents them.

And I would argue this method of media consumption plays a decisive role in creating the divide between knowing the war and understanding it, especially in the way in which these stories are covered.

To Americans, the war is considered a stalemate as no side is decidedly at risk of losing in the immediate future. In addition, until something does happen, there is no motivation to further intervene in the conflict, as Ukrainians are thought to be doing fine by just holding the line, even though this is done more through determination and resourcefulness rather than preparation and adequate supply.

Footage of Russian bombs demolishing buildings, streets, and cities across Ukraine has become commonplace, to the point active viewers see these atrocities and decide they are nothing new. The informed public is desensitized, something which only seeing footage without being there to witness the screams of those fleeing the attacks, the fear of the survivors, and the stress of having to run for cover at any moment creates.

Moreover, the Ukrainian people are only further dehumanized in the actual coverage of the war when it comes to reporting deaths as numbers on a graph and land as just territory on a map. This method of coverage is simple and easy, it summarizes the whole war and its costs, but taken by itself deprives these numbers of meaning. Unless every death shown on those graphs is

understood as individual human life, every piece on a map understood as once being somebody's home, then this dehumanizing effect will only further make the conflict easy to ignore.

What I have presented paints a grim picture of Americans' outlook on the war in Ukraine, but this should not be taken as a belief that America is becoming pro-Russia. Instead, it is a passive trend desiring non-involvement due to a lack of understanding and a desire to return to American isolationism.

But even with these challenges, recognition of the Ukrainian people's right to sovereignty is still commonplace, seemingly matter-of-fact to most Americans.

Ukrainian flags can still be found displayed proudly in front of American houses, many of which are not Ukrainian themselves but still support the people of Ukraine.

So, while the voices and actions of our voters and policymakers do not always show it, public opinion still believes Ukraine should be a free and independent state.