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On the Timeliness of the Writing on the Wall

Thoughts on East and West (not only) in Times of War

An opening postscript: This text had already been written when Putin's gangster friend in the White House fully exposed himself – to the unrestrained delight of the Kremlin, but also of countless illiberals in the West. "Peace" as the latest but by no means unprecedented formula by which despots justify betrayal and the shameless reversal of perpetrators and victims. The following look back in time may therefore not be entirely unnecessary...

"The difference between the Western and the Eastern intellectual," Czeslaw Milosz once remarked, "is that the former has never really been punched in the face." The Polish winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1980 thus described a fundamental difference of continued significance for (not only) intellectual circles since 1945. Certainly, dates play a key part here: After all, German National Socialism – and Italian fascism to a varying degree – had previously obliterated not only the lives of countless Eastern, but also Western artists and intellectuals, particularly Jews, through strictly organized, maniacal mass murder and extermination. Obliterated or forced out, physically or psychologically destroyed. Several of those who survived the concentration camps or the underground, who remained in American exile or returned to Western Europe or West Germany, came to similar conclusions as their Polish counterparts. They, in particular, had a keen sense of how constant the threat to humanity is – and how disastrous it is to confuse rectifiable ills with fundamental dangers.

But perhaps they remained a minority within their profession for this very reason and, unfortunately, did not become key references for a younger Western European generation. Before Hannah Arendt ascended to international fame, her essays certainly *did not* serve as inspiration for the protesting Californian, Parisian, Frankfurter, or West Berliner students of 1968, and Czeslaw Milosz's Swiss friend, the philosopher Jeanne Hersch, remains largely unknown to this day. The same applies – despite the passing fame of the novel *Darkness at Noon* – to the books and accounts of Arthur Koestler or Manés Sperber. (Although, not coincidentally, the latter two, born at the beginning of the 20th century in Budapest and Galicia respectively, came from an "east-western" socialization, had been infected by Communism at a young age and then broke with it while in exile in Paris, as conscious opponents of Hitler *and* Stalin). Preoccupied primarily with themselves – which remains fatally true to the present day – many leading progressives in the West believed they could ignore Eastern experiences and relegate them to the realm of the anachronistic. After all, what does it mean to have "never really been punched in the face"? Hadn't they suffered dreadfully under the "false consciousness" of the capitalist consumer society, indeed the "terror of consumption", weren't they prisoners of a parliamentary bourgeois "machinery of delusion"? Once firmly in this mindset, self-pity and farcical resistance know no bounds. Which, by the way, is also true in the literal sense: Permanent suspicion of liberal democracy, the obvious weaknesses of which are exaggerated to systemic design flaws, has long since drifted from the left to the right. But there were more serious objections: Did the West not fight enough crucial battles for progress and justice – and did this perpetual productive unrest, criticism, and self-criticism not in fact characterize the West and allow it to shine – not least in the East? So even despite knowledge and conscience – and not simply due to offended vanity – Czeslaw Milosz was thoroughly misunderstood.

Moreover, not only large parts of the democratic left but also the Western right didn't really know what to make of thinkers such as Milosz, Leszek Kolakowski, or Václav Havel: Caught up in a crude post-war anti-Bolshevism, which often bore racist connotations and above all served to relativize the German crimes against humanity, and in the (persistent) ahistorical rapture of the "Christian Occident", many remained blind to the warning signs.

It was probably no coincidence that Karl Jaspers wrote the foreword to the first (West) German edition of *The Captive Mind* in 1953 – the very philosopher who had been Hannah Arendt and Jeanne Hersch's teacher in Heidelberg and a philosopher colleague of Martin Heidegger's, with whom he had fallen out after 1933. Jaspers, who had remained in Germany and only narrowly escaped internment in a concentration camp towards the end of the war, knew from his own experience how virtually limitless the "mind's" possibilities are for bending complex realities to one's liking and justifying injustice through a philosophical-historical lens. Born in Oldenburg in northern Germany, he at any rate understood Czeslaw Milosz, who was born in a small Lithuanian village and now described universal patterns against a historically precise background.

Milosz, who risked his life working in hiding during German occupation and was later awarded the honorary title "Righteous Among the Nations" by Yad Vashem for his rescue of Polish Jews, withdrew from diplomatic service in his now Stalinized homeland in February 1951 and then lived, at first quite precariously, as a political refugee in France. And yet the later famous, rather rude definition of "getting punched in the face" did not only refer to his own biography, nor did it stem from a desire to earn some kind of distinction. Not on his, the most modest skeptic's, part. Even while in exile in the West, he remained aware of what was happening throughout the East. An Eastern Europe – unlike the liberated and soon prospering post-war West – in which deportation trains from the Baltic states rolled into Russian camps, in which the societies of satellite states underwent another ideological *tabula rasa*, and intellectuals were intimidated, imprisoned, even murdered at universities (including here in Krakow). And this, to return to *A Captive Mind*, led by the sophistic justifications of those who had become accomplices to the regime, either through imitation or genuine conviction.

Now, one could dismiss all of this as being of purely historical interest. The German language actually offers two expressions, full of flippant ignorance: "yesterday's snow" and "cold coffee". I believe, however, that the experiences of countless Eastern European writers and intellectuals remain as relevant as ever: *Pars pro toto* by Czeslaw Milosz to Václav Havel to Serhij Zhadan, who alongside many others has for months been fighting as a soldier in the Ukrainian army to stop Stalin's mass murderous revenant in the Kremlin from waging his bloody war of conquest. Or to put it more bluntly: To ensure that at least the people in the West yet will "never really get punched in the face."

Which in turn leads us back to the West and to whether it has really understood the stakes. And also back to Krakow, a city which in the last century – like Odessa and countless other places across occupied Eastern Europe – saw Germans who considered themselves the "master race" commit crimes against Jews and non-Jews. Especially in these months, which mark the 80th anniversary of the liberation of the concentration and extermination camp Auschwitz and the military defeat of the "Third Reich", the now famous phrase "never again" resounds once again, particularly in my home country, the Federal Republic of Germany. Rather as an invocation and not as a hopeful assertion that "it" will not happen again, of course.

But what follows? The call for constitutional resistance against an increasingly strong far-right party using hate propaganda and disgusting historical distortions, and thus threatens to poison society as a whole. It is important, it is a priority. And yet there is a certain unease, a blank space. After all, why do many of the "good Germans" who do not turn a blind eye to the mass crimes of their ancestors, still agree with the strangely abbreviated phrase "no more war"? And why is the equally questionable slogan "violence is not the answer" still so popular among many of those who are specifically committed to fighting antisemitism and racism, who take to the streets for climate action, gender equality, and other humane goals? (Yes, since many among those chanting "no more war" and "violence is not the answer" are intellectuals, let's think again on Milosz's words).

Back in the early 1980s in Paris, the philosopher André Glucksmann, son of Eastern European Jews who had emigrated to France, repeatedly asked why the call for "no more war" was so conspicuous in Germany. Should it not instead have been "no more Auschwitz, no more Treblinka, no more Sobibor, no more Shoah and genocide, no more master race, aggression, and occupation"? And, without relativizing the genuinely German crimes even one iota, "no more Katyn, no more gulag, no more Holodomor, no more Hitler-Stalin Pact, no more 'cleansing', no more 'brotherly help'".

Glucksmann, who, to the astonishment and even disgust of many German pacifists, advocated for a robust Western defense and deterrence capability, had thus expressed what was completely out of the question for most Eastern European intellectuals, if only because of their fractured family biographies. War does not equal war, defense is not the same as attack – and the slogan “violence is not the answer” in the face of a determined perpetrator of violence is nothing more than a recklessly issued blank check for occupation and murder, and thus a kind of complicity.

Those who vaguely and eloquently warn against “violence” and speak of “peace”, which they never define in detail, not only disarm themselves and others and empty themselves of terminology, but also leave the power of definition to today’s perpetrators. Because of course, as Putin and his Foreign Minister Lawrow repeat into every microphone, they also want “peace” – albeit on the condition that Ukraine ceases to be an independent state and that its inhabitants submit to Russia.

Germany’s inadequate military support of this country under brutal attack proves that these are not mere semantic musings. Moreover, the democratic center appears unwilling to openly discuss the very misperceptions that to this day have led to non-decisions or wrong decisions. By contrast, Eastern and Western European populists and pro-Kremlin propagandists don’t even need any such justifying moral pretext for *their* amoral refusal of support – they may, conversely, be more honest in their droning, brutal posturing.

However, even in those Western European countries which once resisted National Socialism and fascism and where therefore the foolish cry of “violence is not the answer” is less common, very few can imagine this: A nation decreed by outside conquest and subsequent stroke of the pen to no longer exist. This happened in Poland in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, and the Kremlin’s “project” in Ukraine in the 21st century.

(And in Italy, too, this aggressive disinterest in the fate of the invaded country has spread – an insight that I owe to Francesca Melandri’s impressive book *Piedi freddi*, which I started reading in its German translation on the train ride to Krakow. And what a privilege it is to sit on an Eastern European train without having to worry about missiles, drones, and gliding bombs. Or rather, not having to worry about them *yet*).

Because yes, there remains this gulf of awareness and perception between Eastern and Western Europe. While some, quite rightly, will celebrate the end of the Second World War and the liberation from Nazism in three months’ time, others will also point out – and again probably largely unheeded – that although looking back is not wrong, it is alarmingly *incomplete*. For what took root in the West (with the exception of Portugal and Spain, which only rid themselves of their dictatorships later) in the years after 1945, not least thanks to American aid, in the form of liberal democracies based on the rule of law and which were continually refined over the years, could only be put into institutional practice in the subjugated East of the continent after 1989, *after* Moscow’s and its satrap regimes’ rule had ended.

But shouldn’t the current triumphs of illiberal parties in the East *and* West, which openly despise the rules of checks and balances and democratic *comment*, lead to the realization that Eastern and Central Eastern European experiences are by no means limited to the past, but rather a seismograph, a mirror, and a concrete harbinger of what could happen in the West, which believes itself to be so stable? Why shouldn’t the atmosphere of fear-mongering and the restriction of freedom of expression under the current Fico government in Slovakia, as described by author Michal Hvorecký, become a reality elsewhere? If the constitutional state was so fundamentally damaged in Poland during the Kaczynski regime, then what guarantee is there that the West – and not just intellectuals, journalists, or judges either – might not “get punched in the face” one day? Not to mention the ideological alliances between Hungary’s authoritarian Viktor Orbán, the members of the German AfD, Matteo Salvini in Italy, and Marine Le Pen in France. Moreover, if Kyiv and Kharkiv are bombed and now even an errant American president blames the *victims* and scales back support – what remains of the West? **One might say that with every announcement by Trump, Musk & Co., day by day less of it remains.**

More than four decades ago, persecuted by the Czechoslovak secret service and in the brief period between his numerous prison sentences, Václav Havel wrote: “Aren’t we in fact –

although according to external standards of civilization far behind – a kind of memento for the West, revealing its latent tendencies?”

People didn't want to hear it back then. And after the real socialist regime collapsed not only in Prague in 1989, Jürgen Habermas, no doubt the most prominent philosopher in the Federal Republic of Germany at the time and today, spoke paternalistically of a “catch-up revolution”. This rightly referred first and foremost to the model of a Western parliamentary democracy and market economy, and thus to the (then still brilliant) frame of reference it offered the East. And yet. Did this very notion of a “catch-up revolution” not also reveal some arrogance in reducing Eastern European intellectuals, and thus the key figures behind the peaceful revolutions, to the rank of thinkers, of valiant interpreters of what had long since been sufficiently explored in the West – from the Enlightenment to the “Dialectic of Enlightenment”, so to speak?

This coincides with the widespread belief that “the end of history” had come after 1989 and that all the important battles had been fought, so from now on it was only a matter of fine-tuning. Indeed, such an idea could only have emerged in the sheltered studies of the West.

And in the present, which now pinches the West too? Don't some there – despite the current lip service paid against “Putin's war of aggression” – still believe that things work differently, i.e. *more slowly*, in Eastern Europe? But such ignorance only persists due to downright scandalous forgetfulness: Didn't prominent Westerners in particular praise an *ex oriente lux* in the decades following 1917 and see the future of all mankind in socialism (with or without Stalinism)? Until, at some point, things became stale and the supposed “fatherland of the world proletariat” was eventually projected onto the “Third World” or, as the latest buzzword has it, the “Global South”.

And those from the East who in the genesis of “homo sovieticus” saw a completely new and horribly mainstream phenomenon, who accurately described the empire in its destructive and territorial nature and therefore warned the sated West – without resorting to resentful, reactionary cultural pessimism like Alexander Solzhenitsyn? Far from having to *catch up*, they had and have something more than the West – the experience of rupture and fragility not only in systems, institutions, and borders, but also in people, confronted with their physical and psychological vulnerability. “We are always at risk of reverting to gorillas”, wrote Henryk Elzenberg, as early as 1936. And this awareness of fragility is not, incidentally, a baffled, banal summary born from a naïve belief in eternal stability but, on the contrary, the foundation on which thought – and resistance – is built.

Milosz, Havel, Gustaw Herling, Witold Gombrowicz, Hanna Krall, Eugene Ionesco, Norman Manea, Milan Kundera, Raisa Orlowa-Kopelew, Andrej Sinjowski, Jelena Bonner and Andrej Sacharow, Zbigniew Herbert, Warlam Scharlamow, Adam Zagajewski, György Kónrad, Josef Skvorecký...

Of course, this list is incomplete. Even to quote those mentioned here with their specific warnings would not only transcend the scope of this speech, but that of the entire festival. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning Josef Skvorecký, who had to leave his homeland after the Soviet invasion of Prague and subsequently lived in Toronto with his wife. His small but efficient publishing house Sixty-Eight Publishers contributed immeasurably to ensuring manuscripts, books, and therefore experiences in the East were not wholly swallowed by the shadow of the Iron Curtain. Similarly, Belarusian artists persecuted by the Lukashenka regime today are establishing venues in exile in Poland and the Baltic states, often at the risk of being attacked by the dictatorship's henchmen.

During the day, Skovrecký taught at the university, but more importantly continued to write his clever and witty novels. Such as *The Engineer of Human Souls*, in which his *alter ego* patiently expounds to Canadian students, those good-natured but eye-wateringly naive “children of the prairie”: No, the Iron Curtain is not a “metaphor for Cold Warriors” but a miserable reality in his former home. And yes, the liberal West even has freedom enough to endure a campus rant filled with selfish nonsense like “Are there ANY values in this society worth fighting for?” **To be blunt: These supposed “moderates” in the West also helped pave the way for Trump's insane lies.**

Over the last few years, I have repeatedly reflected on the calm and aplomb of this Czech writer in exile, who despite such pompous stupidity does not allow himself to succumb to pure

contempt. The angelic patience with which Eastern Europeans – some of them, such as Tomas Venclova, Juri and Sofia Andruchowytch and Andrej Kurkow, are participating in this festival – explain to their Western audience what really lies beneath the surface of the Kremlin empire, the supposedly “disappointed modernizer Putin”, or the “disregarded Russian security interests” – in other words, all the frankly appalling *bullshit* that even intelligent people in the West parrot from a Moscow script.

Such persistent kindness with dashes of sarcasm, such well-defended trust in the persuasive power of transparent truth! And such loyalty to early texts when, for example, the Ukrainian philosopher Anatolij Yermolenko, deeply influenced by Jürgen Habermas’ civil understanding of humanity, writes him an open letter that is as respectful as it is critical, reminding him of the most self-evident, the most obvious: Civil societies not only can, but *must* always be prepared to defend themselves, and hesitation in the face of an aggressor will not create peace, but instead lead to more war. After all, the city of Mariupol was attacked and conquered from the territories under Russian occupation since 2014, and the mass murder of Butsha took place because Putin’s troops advanced from Belarus. “If Ukraine loses this war over its sovereignty,” the philosopher wrote from the bombarded city of Kyiv to his colleague by the tranquil Lake Starnberg in Bavaria, “Russia will undoubtedly move on and occupy Europe.”

Which almost brings us back to the beginning. “The difference between the Western and the Eastern intellectual is that...” Those who failed to understand the Soviet system – often not due to any kind of suppoort, but rather due to an almost axiomatic ignorance – will have difficulty acknowledging post-Soviet society and its current *leader*. And so the consequences of self-imposed blindness reach right into our present day. “There is a tendency,” wrote the Swedish poet Lars Gustafsson back in the early 1970s, “to regard history as something that exists in history books”. Of course, it never remains there.

Moreover, now Western, especially American, intellectuals may face the threat of what Czeslaw Milosz once described as the Eastern experience. Including the complicity of those who pose as “pioneers”. Donald Trump’s attempt to undermine the finely balanced system of *checks and balances* and thus destroy the foundations of liberal democracy currently has its fair share of euphemists – even beyond the digital platform bubbles. The buzzwords “disruption” and “de-bureaucratization” are used to recast destruction as a vital force, younger (and no longer quite so young) media types wax lyrical about the brash “deed”, and the “course of history”, which demands such unrestrained action as a matter of course. Albeit no longer in reference to Hegel and Marx, but nevertheless with a similarly boastful furor. And no doubt – figures such as the long-dead Stalinist cultural warrior Shdanow have long since found Western revenants, and for the Marinettis of our day it is no longer Mussolini but Elon Musk who is the indisputable masculine ideal.

Back in the 1970s, when all the neo-right-wing noise was still left-wing noise, Josef Skovrecky confidently quoted the final sentence from Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* at his Canadian university: *I been there before*. His Eastern European colleagues, who had been socialized during the Communist era, might say the same. But *so what*, one might think, now people in the West will learn that Czeslaw Milosz’s striking sentence was not an axiom, but a clear snapshot. Let’s hope that some of them will now at least look to Eastern Europe for intellectual ammunition instead of lapsing into a passive “Why us?”

Finally, a short autobiographical reminiscence. (Given the situation in which the people – and by extension our colleagues – in Ukraine find themselves, I felt it inappropriate to talk about *myself*, *myfeelings*, etc. in too broad or even restrained a manner).

In fact, however, the then 19-year-old conscientious objector from East Germany, who arrived in West Germany in May 1989, soon had the good fortune of having another experience: The authors in Eastern Europe critical of the regime truly had something different to share than most in the former GDR – and than the majority of those in the Federal Republic. Perhaps we can return to the fact that the discovery of the erotic coincided with the discovery of Milan Kundera’s and Witold Gombrowicz’s books, which then gave rise to stories of their own, later. But since 2021, whenever I’m here in Krakow, my path leads down to the crypt of Saints Peter and Paul Church. And each time, the shock of seeing only stone and marble behind an archway – and a Polish poem inscribed on it. And the person who wrote it was a good friend, was so lively when we first met at the Café Odeon in Paris, was full of illusionless appreciation of life and charitable irony and yet mistrustful of the paralysis of the constant search for irony, as he often perceived it

in the West, which he nevertheless enjoyed: Adam Zagajewski! And what is written down in the crypt: 1945-2021. But it cannot be something so ultimately static, as Adam previously wrote of the “restlessness that drives the wanderer / and turns the wheels of mills, clocks, and carts”.

Besides, what meaning do dates have if we do not fill them with life? In the summer of 1999, I turned the handle of a garden gate in the Parisian suburb of Maisons-Laffitte and approached a small villa hidden in the shade of the trees. Inside the house, home to the exile magazine *Kultura*, which had existed since 1947, Jerzy Giedroyc, who would only have a year to live, spoke about the books and ideas he and his colleagues had produced over decades of work. They had anchored in the consciousness of not only Eastern European intellectuals the idea that freedom and democracy are indispensable for Belarus, Ukraine, and the Baltic states, but also for a free Poland – and for a free Europe. And what a joy it was to see that, with the help of those *Kultura* readers who entered politics after 1989, this could finally be anchored institutionally and that nasty old stories of mutual neighborly animosities could come to an end – for the good of the entire continent. **Especially now that the USA has switched sides, these stories are anything but nostalgic.**

“Czeslaw Milosz was here,” Jerzy Giedroyc said. “Milosz and years later, it must have been 1964, a young 18-year-old Pole from Warsaw, eager for spiritual food and the opportunity to make something concrete out of it. His name was Adam Michnik...”

That same year, at the PEN Congress in Warsaw, I saw Czeslaw Milosz at an evening reading in the Belvedere Orangery Restaurant in Lazienki Park. He sat at a small round marble table, the curved knob of his walking stick leaning against the chair, reading poems with Wislawa Szymborska. Unfortunately, I don’t understand Polish, but I was able to enjoy the two voices and their modulation, the flowing bass and the bright, pebbled leaps, with the other guests. Perhaps Wislawa Szymborska even read from the poem with that beautiful line about the “great garments of the instant”, a quiet praise of the unforgettable moment? And perhaps Milosz read the poem with the wonderful title “An Honest Description of Myself with a Glass of Whiskey at An Airport, Let Us Say, in Minneapolis”? Historical existence is not everything, since world history, which tends to anonymize, must always be countered by the individual voice, not least in the spirit of serene introspection: “I can’t help that we are built this way: one half selfless contemplation, the other – appetite.”

The next day, after that evening in Lazienki Park, there was a reception at *Gazeta Wyborcza* for the authors who had traveled there, at which the then President Kwasniewski sang his own praises for a little too long – before receiving a friendly verbal nudge from the editor-in-chief not to overdo it, despite all his achievements concerning the integration of the East and West. The 18-year-old visitor to Paris of yore had now become a corpulent man in his mid-fifties, but his mischievous smile relativized the years. Over a quarter of a century later, I will have the great pleasure of meeting Adam Michnik again tomorrow. Even if what surrounds and oppresses us at the present time by no means qualifies as *joy*. It is therefore all the more important to have people and books we can turn to – in the East *and* the West. After all, Emmanuel Levinas once correctly observed that finding oneself is far less exciting than discovering the other. **And that too is an antidote for despair, to which we must not succumb.**

Thank you for your kind attention.