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Now Is Night

Undead Soldiers

The medical commission said
A little prayer to their maker,
Which done, they dug with a holy spade
The soldier from god's little acre,
When the doctor examined the soldier gay
Or what of him was left,
He softly said: This man's 1-A,
He's simply evading the draft.

– Bertolt Brecht, "Legend of the Dead Soldier," 1918

I found out that there was a war on between Russia and Ukraine at a small gas station, where I met some Ukrainians who, like me, were traveling across Europe by car. Neither Russian nor European nor American media had made any mention of a real military encounter between our countries, and so it was hard to believe these agitated women when they told of atrocities committed by Russian occupants on Ukrainian soil. They seemed like yet another element of brainwashing, just like the reports of Ukrainian Nazi atrocities that flooded the Russian media against the backdrop of the annexation of Crimea, only now with a Ukrainian accent – a mirror image of aggressive propaganda from the other side of the conflict. Ours was a meeting on neutral territory, so to speak, somewhere in the middle of a generic Europe. The women's tone toward me was unfriendly, even accusatory – as if being Russian automatically made me guilty of the atrocities they were describing. At some point it even seemed that they were screaming at me. Yet their stories of welded-shut zinc coffins returning "from the East" etched themselves into my mind.

It was late May 2014**,** three months before Ukrainian security forces captured Russian paratroopers in the village of Zerkalny in the Donetsk Region. Putin's response to the question of how Russian soldiers found themselves in the territory of a neighboring country was that they "got lost" because there is no clearly marked border there, but the appearance of military personnel was living proof that forced even the official Russian media to utter the word "war" – though the Russian and Ukrainian presidents immediately rushed to sign a ceasefire agreement, as if to end the war before it had really even begun.

Then again, the war had actually begun long before Russia's secret incursion into Eastern Ukraine. The war came to the Maidan with the first nationalist slogans, and it came to snuff out the revolution. Rabid nationalists were the ones who brought war as they wrecked statues of Lenin. The nationalist turn of the Maidan

Crosses marked only with numbers stand on the graves of unknown Russian-backed separatists at a cemetery in the Eastern Ukrainian city of Donetsk, February 16, 2015. Photo: AFP

Alevtina Kakhidze, *In Zhdanovka, the only place with cell coverage is the cemetary...* , 2014.

repressed the movement's social content, while the ensuing war has frozen any potential flare-ups of class struggle. Fascism, nationalism, the regime of war arise to put an end to the nascent worker's movement, as Georges Bataille wrote in 1933.[1] Today's wars remain true to the same goal, which is why in countries that the first world customarily calls "nondemocratic" – meaning "poor" – social and political protests become ethnic conflicts so quickly.

"They're showing us cartoons," said my friend on the day Putin flew to Minsk to discuss the conditions for settling the situation in Ukraine. The next morning, I was sitting on an airplane, greedily reading Russian newspapers, trying to understand (in vain) what it was the presidents had agreed upon. It was a secret that this newly printed matter could not reveal, even if it still smelled of ink, and neither could Eugene Thacker's great book on the horror of philosophy, which I read on the plane. Real horror was here, nearby – an invisible, cold horror between the lines of the morning papers, which told of the meeting between presidents and of ten living soldiers in uniform who lost their way into Ukraine, with weapons and documents, yet not a word about hundreds or even thousands of dead.

This is when I remembered the Ukrainian women at the gas station and their stories of welded-shut zinc coffins, which I had had trouble believing because they voiced what the newspaper won't tell you. A chance encounter on the road with these ladies is just part of the rumor mill, hardly an authoritative source of information. To be believed, facts must be revealed and confirmed by official sources presenting incontrovertible proof.

We usually only believe whatever has been publicly recognized as fact, forgetting how many stringent filters reality passes through to reach that stage – the stage of cartoons made in Russia, Ukraine, the US, or Germany depicting puppet presidents and the politics of the countries they represent. Such cartoons never show welded-shut zinc coffins with dead soldiers. They only show living soldiers, who, in the very last instance of the official Russian media spectrum, were after all only lost (maybe it's comedy, not truth, that we're unconsciously looking for in cartoons, and maybe that's what gives them their strength).

In a way, they really were lost: according to the few witnesses, many of the Russian soldiers were convinced that they were being sent to some region of Russia for exercises, only grasping that they were in Eastern Ukraine when the hail of bullets began. Conscripts get lost while following some murky order, as do mercenaries, who also don't understand entirely where and why their division is moving; they are ideologically lost, succumbing to patriotic hysteria and throwing themselves into battle with any enemy indicated by mass propaganda, itself especially intolerant in times of war.

Entire divisions get lost with "one-way tickets" to enemy territory, only coming home as "two-hundreds." "Cargo 200" is the general name given to both fallen Russian soldiers and the zinc coffins in which they come home from the war, as if death had welded body and coffin together in zinc, turning both into one singular dead weight. This dead weight is the main material remains, the indisputable evidence, and the only reliable physical proof of war. War is nothing but an assembly line for the production of corpses. Cargo 200 is the principal immediate material product of the war, impossible to consume, while fresh graves are the trace it leaves on the earth.

Such dead weight is a serious problem in an undeclared war. The dead, like the living, have a formal status, upon which the claim of the living over their dead bodies depends. If there is no war, there are no soldiers. Two-hundreds return from Ukraine and, according to official sources, are either somewhere else entirely (e.g., at exercises in Russia's outer regions), or they resigned or went on leave – in a word, they are lost, but not fighting in a neighboring country. Identified or unidentified, what to do with this cumbersome burden? As a rule, in wartime the unidentified are buried in mass graves, and their families receive funerary notices or letters stating that their loved ones are missing in action, while identified two-hundreds are given to their families for burial. But what do you tell the families if there is no war, and where do you put the unidentified bodies?

As the state wages its undeclared war, it faces the same question as the murderer: What to do with the body? There are rumors that some of the white trucks in a Russian humanitarian aid convoy that drove into Ukraine were empty but returned full of cargo 200. Some bodies come home, others stay on Ukrainian soil, buried on the spot. Some say that the Russian army has bought mobile crematoria: special trucks on a Volvo frame for the quick and safe disposal of biological waste such as the corpses of homeless animals or infected cattle.

The undeclared war announces itself when conscripts and even more contract soldiers stop sending news to their loved ones. Some relatives mobilize, joining forces to search for and collate information, organizing communities and committees, and soon the Soldiers' Mothers organization is put on the blacklist of foreign agents. Some of their sons are found, others are not. Some mothers continue to wait, others receive their two-hundreds. Families meet and bury this cargo. Its point of origin is unknown, the

only explanation a short note: "died while executing his military duty." The official explanation says they died in their own country – on maneuvers, or in an accident such as a gas main explosion – but there is no proof of war more solid than these identified two-hundreds, their coffins, and their graves, whose number is steadily growing: in wartime, the army literally goes underground.

Not only the army, but the civilian population too goes underground. Those who have nowhere left to run go down into the basements, pedestrian underpasses, and bomb shelters left over from the Second World War, with their children, mattresses, cats, and stools. Civilians hide from death in bomb shelters, while soldiers hide in foxholes and trenches. Dead soldiers hide in graves. Basements, underpasses, bomb shelters, bunkers, foxholes, and trenches are all anterooms to the grave – places where you look for final peace and shelter from the cold terror of the war raging above. Under a world at war, the mole of history burrows its tangled labyrinth, where, as in a nightmare, you go from one space to another – from the bomb shelter to the bunker, to the trench, into the basement, and finally, into the grave.

The grave is the final and ultimate bomb shelter. But even here, there is no rest for dead soldiers. Even the presence of their bodies as evidence of war rarely reaches the stage of official and verified information. Journalists try to get in touch with relatives and risk their lives in attacks by unknown assailants during visits to cemeteries to check the headstones on freshly dug graves – this, in fact, is one of the stringent filters that grinds reality into a cartoon – while the families suddenly fall silent or undergo strange metamorphoses.

"Dear friends!!!!!!!!!! Lonya is dead and the funeral is at 10 a.m., services at Vybutky. Come if you want to say goodbye," writes a twenty-nine-year-old paratrooper's wife on her page on the social network VKontakte, leaving her telephone number for friends to get in touch. The page is removed the very next day, but some journalists manage to make screenshots and call the number. The wife hands the phone to a man who introduces himself as Lonya and says that he's alive and well, ready to dance and sing.[2] Telephones can be taken away and a woman is easily put under pressure. Still, there is something about the very idea of a telephone conversation with somebody whose name one saw written on a gravestone (until the nameplate was removed), the very possibility of a singing, dancing zombie at his own funeral, having returned to his wife from a place from which there is no return. It's an evil cartoon reality, a twisted caricature of truth.

In Alexei Balabanov's film *Cargo 200* (2007), a girl falls into the hands of a militiaman who turns out to be a maniac and ties her to the bed in his apartment. She is waiting for her paratrooper-fiancée to come home from Afghanistan, but the fiancée comes home as cargo 200. As an official, the militiaman is given custody of the zinc coffin, brings it home, opens it with an axe, and throws the corpse onto the bed next to the girl while shouting, "Wake up! Your groom is home!" The girl is left to lie on the bed next to her decaying, fly-eaten bridegroom. The action takes place in 1984, exactly thirty years ago, during the war in Afghanistan, which is when the term "cargo 200" first emerged; it referenced both the number of the corresponding order of the Ministry of Defense of the USSR (Order No. 200), and the average weight of each transport container carrying the body of a dead soldier (200 kg). I remember that year – my mom taking my hand, bringing me to the window, pointing towards the horizon, through the Kazakhstan steppe all red with poppies, and saying: "Look, there is Afghanistan."

Two hundred kilograms is the weight of the entire "transportation container," a tightly shut wooden box. According to transportation regulations, this box contains a wooden coffin. The wooden coffin contains a zinc coffin, hermetically welded shut, which, in turn, contains the dead soldier's body. But all these layers aren't enough to contain the dead. Like the paratroopers who stumbled into Ukraine, the dead get lost and wander around. They come home to lie down next to their brides, like in the 1984 of Balabanov's film, or they return to their wives and families to take care of them, like in our own 2014.

It is usually the poor who become soldiers, those who have nothing to offer except their own lives or the lives of others in exchange for bread and shelter for themselves and their loved ones. How else can a state fighting an undeclared war get the silence it wants from the recipients of that dead weight? It is not only living soldiers who are breadwinners; through military mortgages and other death benefits provided by the Ministry of Defense, dead soldiers continue to feed their families after they're gone.

In his story "Sherry Brandy," writer and gulag survivor Varlam Shalamov describes the death of poet Osip Mandelstam in the camp. The poet dies drained of all strength, wasting away from the diseases of the camp. He gets his camp rations and greedily starts tearing away at the bread with scorbutic teeth, bloodying the bread with his bleeding gums: "By evening he was dead. They only registered it two days later, because his inventive neighbors succeeded in receiving the dead man's bread for two days in a

row, with the dead man raising his hand like a marionette. It so happens he died two days before his date of death, a detail of no small importance for his future biographers."[3]

There is a certain economy according to which the dead continue to feed the living or take part in their affairs in some other way. Once a corpse has entered this economy, it is neither alive nor dead. The cargo 200 of the undeclared war is acquired in the border zone between life and death, together with vampires, zombies, ghosts – all those for whom death holds no rest. They didn't die in Rostov, and they didn't die in Lugansk, but only somewhere between Russia and Ukraine, on the unmarked border, where they are still lost and continue to send signals and care packages from their shady border zone, the zone of the Undead. The corpse is firmly embedded into a machine distributing mortgages and care packages. It seems as if capitalism, for once, is blameless here. But in fact, capitalism feeds itself with the corpses that wars produce. That is the underbelly of the "war of sanctions" – the dimension not covered by the media – with its economic character and its political effects. In the dull grey zone of capital's material reality, the body wanders from one death to the next.

On July 17, 2014, Malaysia Airlines flight MH17, en route from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur, met with disaster. The Boeing 777 passenger jet crashed near the Ukrainian village of Torez, approximately eighty kilometers from Donetsk, killing all 298 people on board, including fifteen crew members. In the course of the extended investigation that followed, different explanations were presented. American and Ukrainian sources claimed that the plane was shot down with a surface-to-air missile by the separatists/terrorists in control of the Lugansk and Donetsk regions and armed by Russia. The Russians, meanwhile, insisted that the plane was probably attacked by Ukrainian forces, or was purposely sent on a dangerous route by a Ukrainian air traffic controller, or was even shot down by the Americans themselves in order to provide a pretext for a new Cold War. Either way, Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 was out of luck; it found itself in a zone of never-ending combat and constant attacks from the air, and its crash became the most obvious confirmation of the undeclared war with international stakes high enough to permit its association with the cold one.

The most exotic explanation, however, came from Igor "Strelkov" Girkin, separatist leader, who claimed that the passengers of the crashed Boeing had died several days before being shot from the sky. This claim was based on alleged eyewitness accounts from separatist fighters who had gathered up the corpses and claimed that they weren't "fresh" and were even bloodless, as if the plane had taken off in Amsterdam already bearing strange cargo: frozen corpses standing in as living passengers strapped to their seats.[4] Some conspiracy theorists even ventured to claim that the shot-down plane was in fact a different Malaysian Airlines Boeing – flight MH370 – that had disappeared without a trace earlier that year, in March, possibly even with the same passengers.

This version of events was clearly borrowed from the British TV series *Sherlock*, where a plane is loaded with corpses to be blown up in midair in order to provoke an international conflict. Girkin's explanation stands out for its fantastic absurdity and its clear contradiction of any principles of reality. However, beyond the principle of reality, the madman proclaims a strange truth: he tells of the airline of the world, where we are all passengers, seatbelts strapped on tightly. Madness is also reality, albeit communicated through a series of metaphors. In this version – let's not call it crazy, but metaphorical – the passengers of the Malaysian Boeing literally die twice. The catastrophe of which they are victims is preceded by another catastrophe, and so on, over and over, in an infinite loop: the plane keeps crashing to the ground, turned into debris by the war, and the passengers are gathered up, frozen, and strapped back into their seats.

"Even the dead will not be safe from the enemy, if he wins," writes Walter Benjamin in his sixth thesis on the philosophy of history.[5] And the enemy wins. Not us and not them, only the enemy wins in this war of attrition. The war as an endless series of enemy victories is "cold" not because no blood is shed (only in cartoons about this non-war is no blood shed). It is cold with corpses whose integrity is compromised, who are killed and frozen, just to be killed all over again. The war supplies new energy to the circulation of global capital at a time of crisis.

The corpses are lost in the time loop of death, in a grey of bad infinity much like the Hindu circle of samsara. But unlike samsara – the circle of reincarnation – our cold war is a loop of endless "re-dyings," which is equally hard to escape. The economy of war is based on the capitalization of death and inevitably implicates all members of society, whose relative peace and security is only sometimes disturbed by ominous returns of lost and dead soldiers who are still ready to go to battle for an enemy victory.

– Berlin, September 2014

Three Packs of Butter

Moscow. Kursky railway station. Summer 2015. In the waiting room, a vending machine attracts my attention. It looks like any other vending

One of the many shops lining the streets of Ramallah, 2014. Photo: Justin McIntosh/Wikimedia Commons

machine, except that it's painted green-and-gray camouflage and sells Russian military dog tags. Today Russian soldiers wear dog tags bearing the words *ВС РОССИИ* (Armed Forces of Russia) and an individual alphanumeric number. The vending machine advertises the dog tags as a fancy and cool accessory. One can buy it for four hundred rubles, together with a chain to wear as a decoration, or with a key ring. If you wear this tag, you will be like a real Russian soldier. Every real soldier must have a tag, so his dead body can be identified.

In the past, the train running from St. Petersburg to Donetsk stopped at this station. Now this unpopular destination has been cancelled. But in the fall of 2014, I once took this train from St. Petersburg to Kursky station in Moscow. It was the cheapest second-class sleeping car, nine hundred rubles, no privacy whatsoever, but pretty okay beds. It was a day-long journey, during which, according to the old good Soviet tradition, one is supposed to engage in nice, warm conversation with a fellow traveler, without introducing oneself. Next to me was a guy from Rostov-on-Don, a city next to the Ukrainian border. As is customary, we were drinking strong black tea with sugar, and the guy shared some sunflower seeds with me. He told me that he had moved to St. Petersburg and settled down, working as a sales manager. He was thinking of bringing the rest of his family to St. Petersburg over time, because, although life was generally still pretty safe around Rostov, there were some shootings now and then.

At some point, a small group of soldiers passed through the carriage. For some unknown reason, everyone, including myself, pretended not to notice them. My fellow traveler also kept talking. But I caught something in his eyes, a very brief shift in focus, which I did not bother to interpret. The soldiers were so young, and the clothes they wore looked so excessively heavy. The thoughts that came to mind at the sight of soldiers in thick camouflage on the train to the Donbass in the fall of 2014 had to be immediately repressed. One dared not think these thoughts. No, this is not that! They might be mere army conscripts going back home from their service, or something else. Anything but that. The soldiers had already disappeared towards a platform, slipping away like phantoms, and only a strange recollection remained, like the subtle smell of earth. Real solders with real dog tags, which they got for free.

A touch of both anxiety and curiosity, raised by the sudden appearance of military personnel among civilians, feels somewhat embarrassing. It resembles the feeling when, sometimes, you see prostitutes from Russia or Ukraine who are about to board a plane to some rich Western country for their work. One could say that they are the same as any other passenger, standing in the same line for the check-in desk, but there is something in their appearance – maybe their high heels, or their hair, or their makeup, or some detail of their dress – that gives away their involvement in another, unknown, dangerous world, the world of having sex with strangers for money. We cast our eyes down: no, this is not that, real prostitutes are somewhere else, where no one sees them – this is just some random aberration, someone who is just dressed up too sexy.

Soldiers are the prostitutes of war. Just like prostitutes, they belong to another, sacred world. This world is based on the violation of a prohibition, be it the prohibition against sex or against murder. Just like the body of the prostitute, the body of the soldier is obscene and exposed to violence. Just like the prostitute, the soldier dwells in the area where average people do not go of their own accord. He is always somewhere else – in a zone of military conflict, a flash point. The violence of war and sex is not meant for human eyes – that's what we think. If this is a spectacle, then it is sublime and can only be observed from a safe distance. The sublime is, according to Schelling, related to the uncanny, *unheimlich*: that which ought to remain secret, but which has come to light. The sublime uncanniness of war and sexual violence.

To be more precise: in modern times this domain is not called "the sacred," but "the unconscious," as if what previously was external and social has now become internal and individual, giving itself away through the language of symptoms. As Bataille used to say, in modern times the unconscious replaces the archaic sacred, or rather interiorizes it. Forbidden areas, previously reserved for the sacred, do not disappear – instead, now the sublime uncanniness of the brothel and of war has its secret agent within us, transforming the memory of our hearts into a monstrous phantasm.

The function of mediation between this and that world – between an average man and a prostitute or a soldier – is provided by porn, which, as a privileged medium, gives us updates from the front of forbidden violence. Prostitutes are raped in sex porn, and soldiers are killed in so-called war porn. The visual evidence of war consists of dismembered bodies and dis-bodied members, spread legs and hands, breasts, open mouths without faces – in a word, what in psychoanalysis are called "partial objects." War porn provides the mold for other forms of porn involved in the capitalist production and consumption of pleasures. A permanent condition of our life is the capitalist economy,

which paradoxically finds its balance through an endless imperialist war that roams around the world – from Vietnam to Afghanistan, from Iraq to Palestine, from Ukraine to Syria. War in capitalism is a production line which provides partial objects for a great deal of porn. It is in that world of forbidden violence that the encounter between the soldier and the prostitute takes place.

But what is the difference, one might ask, between the archaic sacred and the modern unconscious? The difference is that the place of the archaic sacred is always somewhere else, beyond the border of prohibition, whereas the unconscious is always right here, without even "having a place" – what is forbidden and untouchable is at the same time the closest, the most intimate. What is the most frightening and alien reveals a truth about ourselves. With this impossible truth, we establish a relation of negation, repression, or rejection: this is not that. Anything but that.

"You ask who this person in the dream can be. It's *not* my mother," says the patient. To this, Freud responds: "So it *is* his mother." There are things which, according to Freud, can come to the light of consciousness only in negative form:

> Thus the content of a repressed image or idea can make its way into consciousness, on condition that it is *negated*. Negation is a way of taking cognizance of what is repressed ... The outcome of this is a kind of intellectual acceptance of the repressed, while at the same time what is essential to the repression persists.[6]

In the dream-like language of the unconscious, "no" simply means "yes."

"This is not war," they said when the situation between Russia and Ukraine was formally discussed, not only by Russian propaganda in the mass media, but by all interested sides, such as European and American officials. From the "ATO zone" to permanent breaches of the peace agreement signed in September 2014 in Minsk, for more than a year this was called anything but war.[7] "With whom is Ukraine at war?" This was the question a journalist asked Maria Gaidar, hired as deputy chair of the state government of Odessa. It was not easy to answer this question. Officially, there were no Russian troops in Ukraine. With whom was Ukraine at war? With itself? With no one? The truth of the war is like the kernel of a dream, which reveals itself through negation, through the repeated "this is not that."

When they say, "This is not war," it is not a lie (we are trapped in a self-referential paradox, also known as the liar's paradox – but that's what happens when we try to bring anything to light by means of language, since it is language which, by lying, speaks the truth). So, this is not a lie, it is negation in the Freudian sense – an attempt by the unconscious to say, yes, this *is* that. Thus, through the lie of media, we get a kind of inverted access to the truth of the social repressed. "No" is a paradoxical "yes" of the undeclared war, its peculiar evidence, together with other evidence, like groups of armed soldiers found in the territory of another state, or fresh anonymous or mass graves, or dead corpses with or without their dog tags, or the negative evidence of those who left and never came back.

Another form of evidence is refugees. As the war goes on, it produces tectonic movements of people. Civilians run away from the places where combatants come. Those who can run, run, taking along with them what they can. What or whom they cannot take, they leave – there are always those who do not want to leave their land, or those for whom running and crossing borders would be impossible or too difficult. Soldiers enter the cities and take selfies with abandoned cats, whose owners disappeared, escaped, or died. Prostitution is a privileged form of employment in territories invaded by soldiers. When factories, schools, hospitals, and shops close, there aren't many places left to work. Prostitution also gets cheaper. Sex workers in war zones are ready to provide more services for less money. But they also try to escape to neighboring places.

As an unknown pimp reported, the Moscow black market for sex enjoyed very good times because of the invasion of people from Ukrainian cities and villages. He suggested that, for a sex worker, it is nicer to be from Donetsk or Lugansk than from Western Ukraine, because costumers feel much more compassionate towards them, whereas sex workers from the west are massively abused. One could probably explain this not only through nationalism but also through the idea of an alleged difference between refugees and economic migrants – those from the east seem to be fleeing war, whereas those from the west are simply fleeing poverty.

In Europe now, there are great attempts to apply this formal, abstract difference to real people running from the Global South. "Are these people really trying to escape from war, or they are just travelling in search of a better life?" That's what they ask, addressing one and the same crowd of huddled masses, half of whom will be grabbed and sent back to their devastated homelands to try once more to live there, and the other half, the lucky ones, who will

Ramallah, December 2015. Photo: Maria Kochkina

get the appropriate status and join the growing army of cheap labor whose basic, paradigmatic case is prostitution. In Russia now, people from Lugansk and Donetsk are cleaning houses, doing laundry, renovating flats, etc. The supply of labor is huge; the prices are ridiculously low in this highly competitive market. No, there are no Russian troops and there never were any on their land. This is not war, this is just business.

In a way, our day-to-day reality is itself this negation, this horrified "no" to the question of what is really happening. We think we live our lives as the civilian population of peaceful territories, with the war somewhere outside. It is not here, not in Russia, not in St. Petersburg, but somewhere far away, in Donetsk or in Damascus, beyond the border. This border between the outside and the inside coincides with the imaginary border of the sacred, beyond which anything can happen. But in the non-place of the unconscious, the inside and the outside coincide, and the territories of alleged peace, like my city, St. Petersburg, turn out to be nothing but a symptom of the war that is negated. We say: anything but war, and try to stick to this "anything," which is just the negative of war. This is not a peaceful territory, but the home front. The war has been negated, pushed outside, and repressed, in order to be found again as our deep interior.

The home front of our everyday life is a distorted mirror of that undeclared front where soldiers are being lost and prostitutes are being found. In St. Petersburg, I live next door to the Artillery Academy. From early morning till evening, big groups of conscripts, two by two, pass up and down my street. Every day I see them out my window. They are very young and dressed in uniforms. Recently I was cleaning my window, and they were looking at me, smiling and waving. I laughed and waved back – I've gotten used to them now. But a year ago, when I had just moved there from Berlin, these armed boys in uniforms walking up and down the street made me think that this might be a rehearsal for war, or maybe the beginning of war. But no, this was not a rehearsal.

In the Russian language, for "rehearsal" we say "repetition." A rehearsal rehearses something for the future, whereas a repetition repeats something from the past. The dialectic of rehearsal and repetition is thus to be found in translation. Recently I saw how the two notions coincide – it was a parade of military technology in St. Petersburg on Victory Day, May 9, 2015. Huge crowds, thousands of people, were in the streets – entire families with their babies, saluting the tanks with happy tears of patriotism, and with slogans like "We will repeat, if there is the need!" Glamorous girls with bronze legs and plastic lips taking selfies, sitting on the knees of soldiers dressed in Soviet army uniforms from the WWII period. Civilians were both rehearsing and repeating a phantasmatic scenario corresponding to a universal death drive – a desire for a world where all men are soldiers and all women are prostitutes. This phantasmatic scenario of war points either to the past or to the future, or it points somewhere else, in order to mask the fact that "this is it," here and now.

I have a big mirror that is more than a hundred years old. People say that old, silver-based mirrors keep on their inner surface a sort of record of what happened in front of them. I ask this big, silent piece of furniture: What have you seen, mirror? I imagine it has seen a lot. It might even have seen the worst: the blockade of 1941–44, human beings losing their minds, eating other human beings, falling dead from hunger. I am living in the city that survived, by any available means, a full military blockade. Some people from that time are still alive and remember these 872 days in Leningrad. These people never throw out food. One of them was Rauza Galimova, eighty-one years old. On February 3, 2015, she was detain by the security guards of a small supermarket. A cashier suspected her of stealing three packs of butter. She was brought to the police station, where she was treated badly and immediately died of a heart attack. Three packs of butter, fifty rubles each. The price of a dog tag at Kursky railway station is almost ten times more. No, this is not that.

When one mirror is placed in front of another, the mirrors produce the effect of a corridor of infinity. That's how our military unconscious is structured, as it mirrors the Real of war. Each war repeats and rehearses some other war; wars reflect one another; an obsessive repetition of the Afghan scenario in a Donetsk mode turns out to be a repetition before the Damascus premiere. And we stand in between these mirrors, as if caught in an infinite loop. We, peaceful inhabitants of the home front.

– Cologne, September 2015

Leopard Print Pants

One day in the summer 2015, I overheard some MA students chatting about leopard print pants. Would you ever wear such a thing? They look kind of fashionable, but you wouldn't ever really dare wear them. Such clothing is borderline vulgar. And yet, in December of the same year, I and one of these students got leopard print pants. We brought them from Ramallah, West Bank, where we went for a conference dedicated to Walter Benjamin. Not the easiest place to get to, and apparently not the safest either – in the heart of the Palestinian territories, occupied by Israel and

surrounded by the Wall. Nevertheless, more than one hundred people from all around the world traveled there in order to discuss what the Angel of History really looks like.

Travelling to Ramallah from Jerusalem's Damascus Gate, we were so tired that we didn't even notice when the bus crossed the checkpoint. It was already dark and cold when we arrived. Historically, Arab cities do not really have clearly marked streets, so our map was rather approximate and it took us a while to find the apartment we had booked. The streets were busy with trade – in fact, the whole center of town looked like a big bazaar, with all kinds of popular daily goods for sale, especially casual clothing: hoodies, soft slippers, fluffy socks, and yes, plenty of cute leopard print pants, which immediately made us laugh.

At night, however, things got more complicated, since in that otherwise nice apartment we could not figure out how to make the heater work. The hot water wasn't running either. It was around zero degrees Celsius outside, and perhaps the same inside – too cold for a princess like me. I spent the night in my jacket, cap, scarf, and even gloves, covered by three blankets. We were thinking about refugees, about how they sleep in their tents – and the first thing we did the next morning was go buy warm hoodies, soft slippers, fluffy socks, and leopard print pants.

The conference went well, even if it was repeatedly interrupted by announcements which broke the routine format of academic meetings: some participants couldn't make it because they were turned away at checkpoints, refused passage to the other side of the Wall; one of the attendees was staying with friends at the university campus, where, during the night, soldiers stormed in with tear gas and kicked everyone out; a bomb exploded next door to a hostel where people were having an after-party; a library was destroyed ... We were told that such things happen every night: Israeli soldiers just come without warning, enter random houses, create chaos, and leave, sometimes with no explanation, sometimes arresting someone or saying that they are preventing a terrorist attack. This is what is called occupation.

I didn't experience any such disturbances myself until the last night, when sounds from the street woke me up. Staying in bed, still half asleep, I nevertheless attuned my ears to the noises, like a beast in a hole. People's voices, irregular cries, someone running, silence, voices again, something like a firecracker, then a scary silence. Finally, an explosion: I'd never heard a sound like that before, but it couldn't be mistaken for anything else. The explosion seemed rather far away, not terribly loud, but it made a long, booming sound. "Boooom!" – and the echo flooded my room. I felt fear – not an existential fear with neither subject nor object, praised by philosophers and poets, but a vital, bodily fear which, perhaps, any living being feels when real danger is close: the kind of fear that makes you lose your sense of gravity. I was almost trembling, buried under my blankets and wearing those infantile leopard pants, which now served as my pajamas.

After some time I stood up and, without turning on the light, very cautiously approached the big window. I looked through the curtain: someone was running away, then there was nobody, just a little pile of things on the ground, in the middle of the street, right in front of our building. As the locals told me later, these were stones – Palestinians usually throw them at armed Israeli soldiers. Children throw them especially, as soldiers do not really want to retaliate against children. I returned to bed and fell into an anxious dream, which seemed like a continuation of that real-life nightmare. The sounds persisted. I put my cat into a carrier and went out. There were already other people waiting in the street with their belongings and even pieces of furniture, like chairs and lamps. A bus arrived and people tried to put all this stuff into the luggage compartment. The road was beautiful; we ended up at some palace, but were not let in; while waiting outside, together with all the others, I realized that we were not dressed properly: most of us wore slippers and clumsy nightclothes. It was cold in that garden.

The next morning, the streets where busy again and people behaved as usual, greeting each other, selling and buying funny things, drinking coffee, eating shawarma, as if nothing had happened. In the light of day, the city looked cheerful. This finally made me realize exactly what Slavoj Žižek meant when, a day earlier, in front of a big audience at Birzeit University, he talked about "the dignity of ordinary life." Drawing a historical parallel with the situation in the Palestinian territories, Žižek shared a number of anecdotes about the siege of Sarajevo during the Balkan wars of the 1990s. He relates the same anecdotes in his book *The Metastases of Enjoyment*:

> Suffice it to recall a typical report from the besieged Sarajevo: reporters compete with each other on who will find a more repulsive scene – lacerated child bodies, raped women, starved prisoners: all this is good fodder for hungry Western eyes. However, the media are far more sparing of words apropos of how the residents of Sarajevo desperately endeavor to maintain the appearance of normal life. The tragedy of

> Sarajevo is epitomized in an elderly clerk who takes a walk to his office every day as usual, but has to quicken his pace at a certain crossroads because a Serbian sniper lurks on the nearby hill; in a disco that operates "normally," although one can hear explosions in the background; in a young woman who forces her way through the ruins to the court in order to obtain a divorce so that she can start to live with her lover; in the issue of the Bosnian cinema monthly that appeared in Sarajevo in Spring 1993 and published essays on Scorsese and Almodovar.[8]

Commenting further on the Sarajevan women, who never forgot to put on their lipstick before dodging bullets, Žižek also recounts an exchange of telegrams between German and Austrian army headquarters during the First World War. The Germans wrote: "On our part of the front, the situation is serious, but not catastrophic." To which the Austrians replied: "Here, the situation is catastrophic, but not serious."

The Birzeit University campus is situated outside of Ramallah, some twenty minutes away by bus. On our way back after the conference one day, one of our hosts, Yazan, told us the following story. Some time ago there was another checkpoint between the two zones, separating the university from Ramallah, where most of the students lived. The bus did not yet run between the city and the campus, and, returning home from their classes, students always had to walk a couple of kilometers through the checkpoint area. Once, a random fight with soldiers flared up. A group of students started to run and throw stones at them. Two fat boys could not move as fast as the others and fell a bit behind the group, but they were still trying their best, until they realized that they were actually throwing stones not at the enemy, but at the backs of their comrades.

"What? They have a university?" asked an Israeli customs officer who was interrogating me at the passport control desk about the West Bank, when I was flying back to Russia from Tel Aviv. Yes, they do. The dignity of ordinary life is something one can only see when one is inside this kind of situation – catastrophic, but not serious. They have a university, they have science, they have art and love, they have cute fluffy leopard pants and fantastic falafel. It is just not visible from without, not revealed to an external observer. This life runs behind the Wall. You must go through the checkpoint in order to get there, and it is humiliating.

Of occupied or besieged places, of places where there is war, it is thought that they are totally other – exceptional domains of violence and death. However, as Žižek notes:

> The unbearable is the fact that in a sense *there is no difference*: there are no exotic bloodthirsty "Balkanians" in Sarajevo, just normal citizens like us. The moment we take full note of this fact, the frontier that separates "us" from "them" is exposed in all its arbitrariness ... so that it is no longer possible to draw a clear and unambiguous line of separation between us who live in a "true" peace and the residents of Sarajevo who pretend as far as possible that they are living in peace – we are forced to admit that in a sense we also imitate peace, live in the fiction of peace.[9]

At some point I came to a similar conclusion. My idea was that what we think of as peaceful territory is in fact a home front; war is not somewhere over there, where soldiers go to kill and die, but right here, in the place from which they depart (and to which they sometimes do not return). Our alleged peace is the place from which the phantasm of the sacred area of death and violence is constantly projected onto an elsewhere. We imagine bloody scenes of real war happening far away – in Iraq, in Syria, in Ukraine, etc. – and, comparing these to our situation, we believe that *ours* is not *that*. However, this very "not," this negation, should be read symptomatically, in a Freudian manner, as a roundabout way of letting slip the truth which our own "internal" censor cannot accept: the truth of the mirror reflection of the "there" in the "here"; the truth of the "(t)here" of the war, which we mistake for peace.

I developed these ideas in September 2015, preparing my report for the Academie der Künst der Welt in Cologne, where I was invited to discuss the undeclared war between Russia and Ukraine. The event was called "Phone Calls from the Cemetery and Other Stories," after a work by the artist Alevtina Kakhidze, which was also presented at the exhibition. The title came from a real-life story, as related in the exhibition description:

> Alevtina Kakhidze's mother lives in Zhdanovka, a small town in the northeast of Donetsk that has seen some of the heaviest fighting in the war. She rarely leaves the basement; communal services have collapsed, and the only place that still has cell phone coverage is the graveyard outside of town. It is from there that she calls her daughter. Kakhidze documents these conversations in transcripts she then performs: they tell of her mother's unwillingness to leave her home, of the

conflict's impact upon everyday life, and how people react – either panicking or developing a strange nonchalance. Kakhidze complements these heart-rending exchanges with childlike drawings of the local topography, mapping the conflict's impact upon a landscape familiar from a more or less peaceful childhood.[10]

The artist gave her mother a nickname, "Strawberry Andreevna," perhaps because of the mother's attachment to the little garden in Zhdanovka, which she continues tending in spite of the fact that there are bombings and shootings all around. A lot of people have departed: those who stay look after the dogs that belonged to those who left. Sometimes, Strawberry Andreevna rushes to the graveyard, the only place in the area where the last mobile provider, ironically called Life, still operates. She is not alone at this graveyard, which is busy with people calling their families and friends. From there, she reports to her daughter on the garden, on how she made preserves in her basement or picked strawberries, or how she went to the marketplace to sell vegetables. One of the drawings in the exhibition shows her with two baskets of tomatoes, saying: "I was walking from the garden and thought, what if they will start shooting, where should I hide? Behind which bush? I was going without making stops – because of the fear."

Life persists in places that we often blindly qualify as places of death – from the graveyard in Zhdanovka to places under occupation, siege, or military attack. In Russian, there is a term for "civilians" that translates literally as "those who live in peace."[11] Paradoxically, this word that combines "life" and "peace" is applied precisely to those who reside in conflict zones. "Those who live in peace" are counterposed to the military, as if the real confrontation was not between two (or more) states and armies, but between the armies that wage war, and civilians, who, by definition, *live in peace*, and all the more persist in doing so when the situation is most desperate. When the Lugansk area of Eastern Ukraine was under attack and day-to-day civilian infrastructure had collapsed (there was no water, no electricity, no heating, no gas), the residents of the five-story apartment buildings that are common in the area made fires in the courtyards, cooking there together, eating collective meals, celebrating their newborns.

Paradoxically, it is war that turns a mere population into "those who live in peace." The closer death comes, the more willfully "peaceful" are the lives of people who do not leave their land. True peace is thus not found where everyone is trying to escape into safety and comfort: rather, peace is desperately lived by those who stay. They "live in peace" within the war itself, and in spite of it; they inhabit the war, creating within it a locus of unprecedented dignity, with which they water their little garden, take care of abandoned animals, color their lips, wear leopard print pants, write books, and go to the cinema. Dignity and fear go together – the nightmares of "those who live in peace" change the value of things under the light of day. Their very life in its ordinariness rises against the armies. Children throw stones at soldiers in order to make their way to school.

On the last day of September 2015, when my country started to bomb Syria, I was preparing my first class on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* at the European University at St. Petersburg. I opened Hegel's biography and reread the fragment on how this book was written. Hegel was thirty-seven; he was lecturing at the University of Jena, but was not very successful. He was quite poor, he needed money. He had a contract with a publisher in Bamberg for the *Phenomenology*, his first big and serious philosophical book. At some point the work slowed down and Hegel did not receive any payments, until his respected friend Niethammer intervened and convinced the publisher to pay Hegel an advance, as much as half the entire honorarium.

Hegel's deadline for submitting the manuscript was October 18, 1806. Shipping the text from Jena to Bamberg would take five days, so October 13 was his last day to take the package to the post office. On October 8 and 10, Hegel sent the bulk of the manuscript to Bamberg. On October 9, war broke out between France and Prussia. Hegel still had to send the concluding part of the book, but the postal service was no longer functioning. On the morning of October 13, French troops occupied Jena. "The hour of fear" – that's what Hegel called this moment. Soldiers burst into Hegel's house. He tried to be friendly, inviting them for a glass of wine, but he soon had to flee – with the remaining parts of the manuscript stuffed in his pockets. In another house where he took refuge, he spent a few hours organizing these papers and putting the finishing touches on the manuscript. Only on October 20 was he able to send it to the publisher, who, in spite of this delay, paid him what was due, as Hegel was broke and his house plundered.

This is the story of how *Phenomenology of Spirit*, one of the most difficult philosophical books ever written, came into the world. Its first chapter, "Sense-Certainty: or the 'This' and 'Meaning,'" discusses the dialectics of the phrase "Now is night." In the light of day, we can only keep this night true as negated, and by this

very negation preserve it. Thus, in one sense, "Now is night" remains true even if it's not, and, in another, the *now* never really *is*. As soon as we say "now," we are already too late; we mark it as a moment that immediately falls into the past. However, by saying, and especially by writing, we keep this past: time itself folds into these "past nows." That night in Ramallah turned this dialectics into a personal experience of fear, the knowledge of which is shared by Hegel and the old lady from Zhdanovka. That was the night hour of fear, both negated and forever preserved by the dignity of the light of day.

– *St. Petersburg*, *February 2016*

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1
George Bataille, "The Psychological Structure of Fascism," in *The Bataille Reader*, eds. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Blackwell, 1997), 122–46.

2
See http://www.novayagazeta.ru/society/64975.html (in Russian).

3
See http://shalamov.ru/library/2/14.html (in Russian).

4
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5
Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (Shocken Books, 2007), 255.

6
Sigmund Freud, "Negation," in *On Metapsychology*, The Pelican Freud Library, vol. 11 (Penguin Books, 1977), 437–38.

7
"ATO zone" (Anti-Terrorist Operation zone) was how Ukrainian officials and media referred to the regions of Donetsk and Lugansk after they came under the control of Russian-backed separatists.

8
Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Women and Causality* (Verso, 1994), 2.

9
Žižek, *Metastases of Enjoyment*, 2.

10
See https://www.academycologne.org/en/article/651_alevtina_kakhidze_phone_calls_from_the_cemetery_and_other_stories.

11
Mirnye zhiteli (мирные жители), from *mirnye*, meaning "peaceful" (civilian, nonmilitary), and *zhitely*, meaning "those who live" somewhere (people, population, inhabitants, residents).