

The Issue of Evil in the Context of Russia's War against Ukraine

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Abstract: *This research is an attempt to address the issue of evil in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine in an analytical way, trying to specify what evil is and check whether this or that feature of evil is applicable to the reality of the war. It is argued that there are the following three conditions that are separately necessary and jointly sufficient for the characterization of something or somebody as evil: the phenomenon needs to be the result or the source of (1) wrongful acts of action or inaction that (2) lead to the ruination of lives of other people and (3) are either planned or foreseen or being the results of willful blindness about consequences of the acts. The research gives arguments in favor of the thesis that many acts of a significant part of the people of contemporary Russia show the abovementioned features. Moreover, it is argued that their evil-doing is also characterized by regularity. Then it is argued that evil in Russia's war against Ukraine exists in the following three modes: the factual evil (acts of ruining lives), the active evil (initiators and implementers of ruining lives and those who actively support them) and the passive evil (those who do nothing to stop the acts that are ruining lives).*

Key words: *Russo-Ukrainian war, evil, war, Ukrainian thought, Ukraine*

Introduction

One of the ideas in current Ukrainian thought is the statement that the people of Ukraine are fighting against evil in the war that was launched by Russia. This idea is expressed by different Ukrainian thinkers, for example Myroslav Marynovych, Yurii Chornomorets, Andrii Baumeister, etc. This idea is used to explain the essence of the war in Ukraine; it is one of the core ideas of a set of thoughts that are developing in Ukraine as ways to interpret the Russian aggression.

The thoughts of those thinkers on evil are characterized by two features. First, the roots of these thoughts are metaphysical, and second, these thinkers use the term "evil" to refer to not only certain acts of people but also certain people themselves.

Yurii Chornomorets describes Russia's war against Ukraine "a confrontation between evil and good." He argues that the victory of Ukraine is inevitable in this war and develops traditional Christian thoughts that evil parasitizes good, and that evil is powerless by itself (Chornomorets 2022). It is possible to see similar facets of Christian philosophy in Myroslav Marynovych's words that

...the abstract evil against which we are fighting is personified
in the Russian Federation today. (Marynovych 2022)

That is, Ukrainian current resistance to Russian military attacks appears as one of the forms of the eternal struggle between good and evil that takes various forms in different countries and eras. Another Ukrainian thinker, Andrii Baumeister, shows a similar way of thinking. He states:

Today, we were reminded that evil is a part of reality
and an ineradicable element of our lives. We receive a certain shock
when we see evil face to face... War has not gone anywhere.
Evil has not disappeared from history. Today's Russia
is one of the hypostases of evil. Russia is now the brightest
and most obvious albeit not the only one
of these hypostases. (Baumeister 2022)

Again, we see here the metaphysical idea about the eternal struggle between good and evil and the thought that Russia now is one of the forms of evil.

It is typical that current Ukrainian thinkers characterize not only certain kinds of acts as evil but also some people as evil. For instance, Myroslav Marynovych tells us that

...evil in this case encompasses the leaders of the Russian state,
the Russian Federation, Russia as a state, as a country, as a people,
because, unfortunately, the Russian people
mostly support this war. (Marynovych 2022)

Andrii Baumeister also holds that in Russia there are people who are evil:

For me, there is also another hypostasis of evil in the Russo-Ukrainian war
that is frightening. Wars have existed before the war in Ukraine broke out:
there was evil before this war. However, there is a danger
that a large number of people can be completely immune to facts,
evidence, and research; that millions of people can perceive
a distorted reality as normal. (Baumeister 2022)

Thus, there are thinkers in Ukraine who address the problematics of evil in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine and they do so in a synthetic or integrative

way by developing a framework that draws on different kinds of metaphysical thinking. We want to add to their thoughts an attempt to address the issue of evil in Russia's war against Ukraine in an analytical way, trying to understand what evil is and check whether this or that feature of evil is applicable to the facts of the war and to the people who involved in it.

Before proceeding to our discussion, we will provide a terminological clarification regarding some words that will be frequently used. When we use such words as "Ukrainians," "the people of Ukraine," "Russians," and "the people of Russia" we will mean citizens of these states—that is, we will refer not to the ethnic but rather political dimension of those words.

What is Evil?

When people talk about evil, they mean wrongfulness; however, it is obvious that the term "evil" does not refer to ordinary wrongdoing actions. People use this term to characterize extremely wrongful actions, which provoke extreme suffering and tribulation. Famous contemporary researchers of the topic of evil agree that an extreme level of suffering is a crucial part of the characterization of it. For example, in his article "A Conception of Evil," Paul Formosa writes that doing evil causes "a life-wrecking or ending harm" (Formosa 2008: 236); in her book *The Atrocity Paradigm: A Theory of Evil*, Claudia Card states:

Evils tend to ruin lives, or significant parts of lives. (Card 2002: 3)

Seeing a certain consensus among researchers of evil, as well as in the ordinary usage of the word, we will take the feature of the *ruination of lives* as one of the main dimensions of evil.

Is it possible to tell that in their war against Ukraine, Russians ruin people's lives? Many tens of thousands of Ukrainians, including some of my friends, have been killed by Russian troops in this war; millions of Ukrainians, including my young children, were forced to leave Ukraine because the daily strikes of Russian missiles and other weapons have destroyed thousands of apartment blocks in my country. Are these acts of the Russian troops acts that ruin lives? Certainly, they are, and we have solid evidence to prove this statement.

It is necessary to pay attention to the fact that tragedies happen in the life of different peoples throughout the world. But there is some difference between deaths caused by an earthquake and deaths caused by militaries who aim missiles and bombs. Stones do not have a choice and will; they do not choose to kill or not to kill people. However, although Russians can choose to not kill Ukrainians, they still choose to do so. Russians were faced with a choice to ruin or not to ruin the lives of Ukrainians,

and they chose to ruin them. Therefore, in the case of Russia's war against Ukraine, we clearly see not only evil but also evildoers.

We hold that each act of evil has two sides: the results of evildoers' acts are "side B" of evil and evildoers themselves are "side A" of evil. The existence of an evildoer is a necessary condition for the appearance of a corresponding evil. Some philosophers think that we can find certain kinds of evil that are able to exist without agents, that is, without evildoers. They mean so-called "natural evils" like human mortality or natural disasters that cause urban destruction, but we do not agree with this position. We think that there are better arguments to consider such phenomena as just the result of tragic coincidence or the laws of nature as long as we do not apply a philosophical approach through which we hypostasize spirit forces as the ultimate cause of natural disasters, human mortality, etc. However, these philosophical debates are senseless in the case of Russia's war against Ukraine. We clearly see here not only the ruination of the lives of Ukrainians but also the agents of this ruination, and they are evil insofar as they ruin lives.

There is one more question that we need to consider regarding the issue of evil in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine. We wrote that actions aimed at ruining people's lives are evil but is this true for all situations? Imagine a situation in which the killer is caught by the police and is imprisoned based on the verdict of a court. Did the actions of police and judges ruin this person's former life? Yes, they did. Are these actions of police and judges evil? No, they are not. Let us consider one more situation. A man in a dark alley was attacked with a knife by a criminal but the victim managed to defend himself by killing the attacker. Did this action ruin the perpetrator's life? Definitely. Is killing a criminal in self-defense evil? No, it is not. The fact is that another important feature of evil exists: an evil act is a wrongful act. In Russia's war against Ukraine, we see people fighting both from Russia's side and from Ukraine's side; however, Ukrainians with weapons in their hands are defending their lives, country, and freedom, but Russians, trampling all international and moral laws, attacked in order to take other people's lives, country and freedom. On the part of Ukraine, we see a just defensive war, and on the part of Russia, there is an unjust war of conquest. Not all kinds of the ruination of life are evil—just those that are wrong.

It is not easy to decide whether a person is an evildoer or not. For this purpose, it is necessary to have a clear understanding of which features make a person evil and which feature cannot make him or her evil. For instance, it is important to note that evil persons need not be absolutely malicious, that is they need not be bad in every respect or act. Imagine the situation that the serial killer has achievements in sports or loves his own child. Is it possible? Yes, it is possible. Consider another situation in which a person uses his positive traits to commit evil. For example, courage is a positive trait; however, a person can use his courage to be more effective in achieving evil goals. Therefore, the presence of certain positive qualities or features does not give grounds to consider a person who does evil as not an evildoer.

How to describe an evildoer? He or she is a person who does wrongful acts to ruin the lives of other people. But this is an incomplete definition because it is necessary to consider the issue of the intentionality of such acts. We do not think that a person who accidentally ruined another person's life is an evildoer. We will describe a person as an evildoer if he or she acts while being aware that his or her acts are able to cause the ruination of somebody's life. However, it is necessary to emphasize that the levels of this awareness can vary.

We distinguish between three kinds of evildoers by their level of awareness of their acts.

- 1) The most obvious kind of evildoers first plan to ruin the life of another person, and then they put those plans into practice.
- 2) Another kind of evildoer does not plan to ruin lives, but they foresee that their acts will ruin the lives of other people and this understanding does not stop them from performing these acts.
- 3) The third kind of evildoer is able to foresee that their acts will ruin the lives of other people, but they perform these acts without thinking properly about the consequences of these acts for other people.

Let us add more to our considerations of the last kind of evildoer. Persons of this kind practice something like willful blindness. Can we say that the suffering of Ukrainians from Russia's war was foreseeable for Russians? Certainly. Because, if you strike apartment blocks, maternity hospitals, and electrical power stations of a foreign country with thousands of missiles and perform acts that lead to other kinds of intolerable harm, it is obvious that the people of the foreign country will suffer. However, some Russians practice thoughtlessness and calloused indifference to the suffering of Ukrainians. They talk as though they do not think that it is a bad thing to strike a foreign country with thousands of missiles. It is difficult to understand such position, but similar words have been heard previously in history. Hannah Arendt, in *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* addressed the case of Adolf Eichmann who did not think a lot about the consequences of his acts and just tried to do his best in his work. The point is that his work was helping implement the Holocaust. Eichmann's thoughtlessness did not save him from a trial and an execution. Hannah Arendt wrote about Adolf Eichmann:

He was not stupid. It was sheer thoughtlessness—something by no means identical with stupidity—that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period. (Arendt 1965: 285)

Let us address one of the numerous war crimes in Ukraine. On the 14th of January 2023, Russians hit an apartment block in my city, Dnipro, with a large anti-ship missile, the Kh-22. This missile killed forty-six civilians, including 6 children, in

their bedrooms and kitchens. We think it is clear that it is wrong to aim large anti-ship missiles at a city of a foreign country. Is it to be expected that this missile will kill people? Of course. Therefore, the people of Russia can say as much as they want about not understanding that they do extremely wrongful things in Ukraine, but such arguments are not serious.

If many Russians avoid thinking about the truth of the war or ignore evidence of this truth, they are engaged in self-deception. Self-deception is not a good excuse for committing evil acts. Could it be assumed that they do not know what is happening and that they do not know that their state is killing the people of a neighboring country and condemning the citizens of that country to suffering? Of course they know it. One might say that in the age of newspapers or earlier eras it would have been possible to hide such things, but in the age of the Internet, when every citizen of an aggressive country can find live reports from the attacked country if he or she wishes, it can no longer be said that someone is preventing the Russians from knowing about the evil that they are doing in Ukraine.

Some Russians argue that their mass media tell them that they do not do wrong but rather right acts in Ukraine. According to their reports, the Russian mass media has told them that Ukrainians are like “Nazi Satanists” and that it is a good thing to bomb their cities. In response to this argument, we offer to imagine a situation where somebody told a person that his neighbors are demons or something of the sort, and therefore he must go to their house and murder them. Certainly, those who incited the murder are evil people, but this does not mean that the person who goes to murder the family is not evil. It is a situation in which ignorance is no excuse. Aristotle described such situations well:

Legislators impose corrective treatments for the ignorance itself, if the agent seems to be responsible for the ignorance. A drunk, for instance, pays a double penalty; for the principle is in him, since he controls whether he gets drunk, and his getting drunk causes his ignorance... And they impose it in other cases likewise for any other ignorance that seems to be caused by the agent’s inattention; they assume it is up to him not to be ignorant, since he controls whether he pays attention. (Aristotle 1999: 38)

Following this example, if many Russians say that watching their media has “intoxicated” them with wrong ideas, this does not mean that they are not guilty of crimes in Ukraine that they have performed. They are guilty both of committing these crimes and of watching their media over and over again, which makes them like a drunk driver whose car has crushed people at a bus stop and thus should be punished not only for the death of the people he killed but also for drinking alcohol before getting in his car.

Arguably, the words that some Russians use to talk about their ignorance of the sufferings of Ukrainians are actually a sign that many of them do not consider the suffering of Ukrainians as being significant. And this is another confirmation that they are evildoers. Eve Garrard precisely describes this feature of evildoers in the following passage:

The evil act is done by one for whom (at least some of) the considerations that tell against his committing this wrongful act, are silenced altogether. The sufferings of his victims, along with other considerations such as their rights, play no part in his practical deliberations. They count for nothing at all. And it is this silencing, this inability to hear the victims' screams as significant, that accounts for the peculiar horror that we feel when we contemplate these evil acts and their agents. (Garrard 1998: 53-54)

However, we will not use the feature of deliberate deafness to the suffering of the victim as a condition to characterize somebody as evil because it is difficult to check for the presence of this feature. There are more effective methods to check the external acts of people than their internal mental states. For example, we can pay attention to the regularity of evil acts.

We believe that the fact that Russians have done evil regularly in Ukraine is solid evidence that many of them are evildoers. We will explain this thought. It is difficult to think that doing regular wrongful things is the same as performing wrongful things without the intention to do wrongful things. In Ukraine, we see not only one missile strike but thousands of them—not one day of military action but more than 365 days of intensive military action since February 24, 2022. If Russians do evil acts in Ukraine regularly, then we do not see an opportunity to refute our thesis that those who do these acts are evildoers.

Inaction and Evil

The ruination of lives can be not only the result of action but also of inaction. Not in every situation, but we sometimes see that refraining from acting could itself be an evil act. We mean situations where there is willful neglect and a deliberate failure to do an important act. Before beginning our analysis of these items, it is worth clarifying that in law there is the concept of the duty to rescue, but in our article, we do not refer to legal norms, as we are addressing the issue of evil in terms of moral philosophy.

It is possible to imagine different types of evil inaction. Consider two of them. Imagine (1) a situation where the crew of a large ship sees drowning people in the sea, who are holding on with their last strength to planks left after the shipwreck of their yacht. Will it be evil if this crew does not help and leave the shipwreck sufferers to drown among the waves? If the crew does nothing, it will be a form of inaction, and

at the same time, it will be an evil act. Let us change this scenario and imagine that (2) the shipwreck of the yacht is related to the large ship. In fact, the large ship's helmsman and his assistant do not like yachts, and they deliberately steered the vessel towards one of them to crush it. Would it be evil if the ship's crew did nothing and let their helmsman and his assistant continue to crush all of the yachts that their ship meets on the way? The second type of inaction is definitely different than the first case.

In case (1), on the one side, we see (a) sufferers in danger, and on the other side, we see (b) a group of people who are potentially able to save people from death. If (b) shows inaction and does not save (a), then (b) will become evildoers. In case (2) we see (a) victims of an evil act, (b) a group of people who are evildoers in being the cause of the suffering of these victims, and (c) a crew that includes (b). And all people from set (c) of the second case will become evildoers too if they practice inaction in two aspects: if they do not save (a) and if they do not stop (b) the evildoers on the ship from doing evil acts.

It is impossible to apply inaction from case (1) as a model to Russia's war against Ukraine because the suffering of Ukrainians is not something that happened without the will of the Russians. The type of inaction from case (2) is more appropriate because the suffering of Ukrainians is caused by the Russian invasion. It is clear from this model that not all people of Russia did evil to Ukrainians in this war, but if they do nothing to stop their Russian evildoers, they become the accomplices of those evildoers.

To construct a more relevant model, imagine 14 people who have inherited an old bus. These people are different from each other, but they elected a leader and assigned him to be the driver. At first the driver drove the bus like other drivers, but then he began to crush people on the pavement, justifying this by making the claim that they were suspicious and threatened the bus. Some of the deadly bus passengers began to support what was happening with joyful cries, saying that it was high time to use just such a driving style, while some others fell silent and just watched from the windows as their bus crushed more and more people, doing nothing to stop the bus. Let us analyze the moral specifics of the inaction of Russian society to stop the war in Ukraine with the help of this case of a deadly old bus.

Why do Russians not actively do something to stop this war? We know four arguments against the idea that inaction of a part of the Russian people is evil inaction. Let us address all of them.

The first argument is the following: the "passengers of this bus" do not understand what is happening. We think that this is a weak argument because the "bus" has been intensively killing people for at least a year in Ukraine. A year of killings every day is more than sufficient for Russians to understand what is really happening.

The second argument is that the inactive Russians are not really somebody like “passengers” but rather “hostages of the terrorist driver.” However, firstly, hostages do not usually elect terrorists, but Putin was repeatedly elected by a majority of the Russian voters. Another counterargument is the following: the hostages cannot get away from the terrorists when they want, but the Russians can: Russia did not close their borders and 1/14 of the “bus passengers” (we mean approximately 1 million out of 140 million people of the population of Russia) have freely gotten out the country since the 24th of February 2022 when they saw fit.

The third argument is the following: the “passengers of the bus” are not obligated to care about people on the pavement, so their inaction to save the lives of the people outside the bus is not evil. However, the perpetrator should help people who are in danger not only if he is obliged by law to take care of the safety of the victims but also when the danger for the victim was created by the perpetrator himself. In our thought experiment, we talk about passengers who are not accidental persons: they have inherited the bus, so they share ownership of it and they elected the driver. In Russia, people are citizens, so they have a responsibility for their state; also, they elected their president and deputies, so they share responsibility for their acts. Moreover, passengers of the bus need to understand that if they do nothing to stop their deadly bus, the people outside of it will have the right to demolish their bus because doing so will be the single way to stop the deaths caused by it. If the passengers of the bus do not feel responsible for the acts of the driver who ruins the lives of other people, they must at least think that their inaction can lead to problems for themselves. So, we do not think that the third argument in favor of this inaction is solid.

The fourth argument in favor of inaction not being considered evil in this case is the following: the number of those who would want to do something to stop the war is so small that they are not able to get what they want. Arguably, this argument may indeed correspond to reality. Suppose that out of 14 passengers of the deadly bus, only one or two are willing to try to do something to stop the deaths caused by it. It will be really difficult for this number of people to do right acts, and they may refrain from acting because they realize that they have almost no chance of success.

So, the situation that is described in the fourth argument seems to be real. And if it is so, then we can infer some conclusions from this. If only a few of the people of Russia are against the war that their country launched in Ukraine, then:

- 1) The vast majority of Russian people either support the killings of Ukrainians or are indifferent to the fact that their country kills Ukrainians.
- 2) The position of active support of the killings of Ukrainians is evil-doing.
- 3) The position of passive support of the killing of Ukrainians is evil inaction.

4) The position of being indifferent to the killing of Ukrainians is either a kind of evil inaction (kind three, thoughtlessness) or not. It is a controversial issue, and it needs further research.

5) If really only a few of the people of Russia are against the war, then their inaction is not evil-doing because their opportunities to achieve success are really limited.

If we talk about inaction in the context of evil, the results of this inaction will be the ruination of lives of people. These results could be either planned or foreseen by an evil person or this person could practice willful blindness about the consequences of his inaction. It is necessary to add one more feature to qualify inaction as evil inaction – such person needs to have the possibility of acting in the right way but chose to neglect this possibility. So, if the inaction of a person is caused by the lack of opportunity to act in a proper way, then such a person will not be an evil person.

Three Conditions to Be Evil

In our article, we have scrutinized different features of evil. The next step in our research will be an attempt to check which of those features are necessary and which are sufficient to call something or somebody evil. As we argued, if we want to have reliable reasons to say that something or somebody is evil, (1) they must be the source or the result of a wrongful act of action or inaction. Is wrongfulness a necessary condition to be evil? Certainly, right acts cannot be evil. But wrongfulness is not a sufficient condition to characterize something or somebody as evil because many deeds are not so dangerous that they can be defined as evil.

The next feature in our considerations was the purpose of an act: (2) an act of evil must lead to the ruination of the lives of other people. Again, we think that this is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for something to be evil. If an act does not ruin lives, it can be a wrongful act, but it will not be an evil act. At the same time, if this act of the ruination of a life is not wrong (for example, a fair verdict of a court) or if this act is absolutely accidental, it will not be an evil act.

After addressing those two features, we noted that an evil act (3) must be either planned or foreseen or the result of willful blindness about the consequences of the acts. Obviously, here we see the same pattern: it is a necessary but not sufficient condition for something to be evil.

If we want to have good reasons to characterize something or somebody as evil, we need to find proof that each of the abovementioned three features is present. We hold that these three conditions are separately necessary and jointly sufficient for the characterization of something or somebody as evil.

At the same time, there are some difficulties when we address the issue of the evilness of people rather than of acts. The first set of difficulties is connected with the

quantity of evil acts. For instance, is it correct to call a person evil if he committed only one evil act? On the one hand, we think that the ruination of life is really terrible, but on the other hand, some bad people are able to change themselves for the better. For such cases, we offer an additional condition to determine whether somebody is evil. It is the criterion of regularity. We should not doubt that a person is evil if he or she commits evil acts regularly.

The second set of difficulties refers to the fact that some kinds of evils are committed by groups of people and the role of different participants of the group can be more or less important in this committing. For instance, in Russia, many people support the war against Ukraine; however, their support may take different forms: from voluntary participation in punitive operations in Ukraine to providing support for Putin's regime through the timely payment of taxes. Of course, we need to distinguish these people. Thus, we offer the criterion of significance: we call evil just those people whose role in this or that act of ruination of lives was significant.

To systematize our considerations in this article, we will use the following classification of modes of evil.

We call factual evil the first mode. This covers the murder of innocent people, violence against innocent people, and other wrongful acts that ruin lives. Factual evil could be the result of either action as a mode of active evil or inaction as a mode of passive evil or both of them.

The second mode of evil is active. Those who do factual evil are also evil, and they are evil in a deep and essential sense because they cause evil – they are its source and implementers. We also believe that people who actively support those who ruin lives are also evil; they are accomplices of evildoers.

The third mode of evil is passive. These evil people are able to prevent this or that wrongful ruination of lives, but through their inaction, they allow that ruination to happen.

In Ukraine, death of hundreds of thousands of murdered Ukrainians, destruction of many cities, suffering of millions of refugees and other enormous suffering caused by the Russians are factual evils. The active evil in this case includes three components. The first one is Putin and other politicians and ideologists of Russia who launched this war. They are the initiators of the deaths and suffering of Ukrainians. Second are those military personnel who implemented the plans of the initiators of the war. Although they only carried out the order of the initiators of the war, they did not refuse to carry it out or sabotage it, so they are the direct executors of factual evil. The third component of active evil applies to those Russians who actively support this war. As for passive evil, we believe that it is those citizens of the aggressor country who passively support the ruination of the lives of Ukrainians through their inaction. The criterion of significance will help us to differentiate these evildoers according to their role in the ruining of lives of Ukrainians, however, each took part (to more or less of a degree) in evil.

Conclusion

The war unleashed by Russia against Ukraine has raised many questions for philosophy and, of course, the issue of evil is one of the most important.

An analytical approach to the issue of evil enables us to obtain a list of conditions to characterize something or somebody as evil and to check whether this or that condition is met by a certain situation. We showed that there are reliable arguments to characterize as evil many Russians and Russian acts in the war against Ukraine. Because these arguments are built on grounds that are clear and verifiable, researchers can independently test whether they are solid or not.

At the same time, we note that the issues raised by us in this article need further study. In particular, we have in mind the mode of evil that we have called passive evil. The indifference shown by many Russians to the suffering of Ukrainians caused by their country needs to be studied in detail and appropriately assessed.

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Notes:

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