

The year I learnt to hate. Damn you, Vladimir Putin



[Pete Shmigel](#), SMH, February 24, 2023

It's possible that, when the stakes are higher, we notice more of the world around us. So it may be with the Russian war on Ukraine at its one-year mark. What can we say we have learnt from the hundreds of thousands of deaths and countless war crimes that have followed Vladimir Putin's illegal, full-scale invasion on February 24 last year?

And, as the son of Ukrainian political refugees from World War II, and as a writer who has been to Ukraine twice in the past 12 months to cover the war, what have I learnt? While I see myself as a humane and compassionate person, I must confess this is the year I've learnt to hate.



Sydney-based writer Pete Shmigel in Ukraine.

But first, the myth of Russian might: the world's so-called "[second greatest military](#)" has been shown to be a direct reflection of Putin's Russia: racked by corrupt nepotism, inept and cowardly. The very idea of emptying prisons to send untrained and unmotivated men to attack highly defended trenches isn't only deadly; in the 21st century, it is downright bizarre.

Russia is now not a world power that needs to be pragmatically accommodated but a rogue regime sustained only by violence against others and against its own people. We have learnt that what Russia lacks in credibility and competency, it compensates for with savagery. We know from the evidence of its barbarity – mass rapes, summary executions, intentional destruction of more than 2000 hospitals, schools, churches and museums, and forcible deportation of Ukrainian children from occupied territories – that this war isn't about checking NATO or defeating alleged Nazis.

Outside Kyiv, I have been to the ruins of brand-new family medical centres that were intentionally shelled or mortared and destroyed by Russian troops. Putin's agenda is to annihilate Ukraine and all things Ukrainian by making unliveable deserts of the nation's cities. I have seen Russian artillery attacks on suburbs with as much military significance as the

Burwood of Sydney or Melbourne. In suburban Kharkiv, I saw residents cut to pieces by shrapnel while going out to buy a coffee or a bouquet of spring flowers.

A single missile attack on residential areas and electricity infrastructure can cost Moscow as much as \$250 million – a cost Putin is willing to pay to force an ethnocide by emigration. Some 14 million Ukrainians, more than half the population of Australia, have been forced from their homes. My parents had to flee during World War II. Now I've had to help another family abandon its home in Kyiv to relocate to the West, without their father, who, being younger than 60, is prohibited from leaving Ukraine. (Not that he would have.)



Pete Shmigel's mother, Nadia Gladysowsky (left), great-aunt Olya and great-grandfather Oleksandr on the family farm in Ukraine in 1943.

Putin has escalated the war not in response to the West providing more weaponry, but rather the opposite. He pounces on perceived weaknesses. It is gross to suggest Ukraine cannot be given the same types of weapons Russia is using to destroy it. There is no such thing as “escalatory self-defence”, as a Canadian colleague has written on social media.

The world, over the past 12 months, has discovered a remarkable people in the Ukrainians. I have met volunteer soldiers – IT guys, NGO workers, and psychologists – who distributed Starlink receivers across northern Kyiv to keep communications open and enable the defeat of the Russians on its outskirts.

What Australia gives the Ukrainians, thus far totalling around \$480 million in military support, is used with positive effect. Ukraine was meant to fall after three days. It has, in fact, liberated nearly half of the territory initially occupied by Russia. Australia gets a great return on investing in Ukraine's defence: protecting democratic values and upholding a rules-based order. We have given Ukraine 90 Bushmasters. Ukraine could easily deploy 90 more (of Australia's fleet of 1200) as the battles of spring approach. It is vital our aid be sustained until victory.

But, as I recount these aspects, something is different about me. Following my trips around Ukraine's north, east and south over the past 12 months, I find myself capable of hatred of those who again rain steel on my family's ancestral country. I hate the return of Russia's wars

and the suffering of another generation. I hate the impact on the kids who are forced to normalise disruption and destruction.

I asked a very progressive Ukrainian friend, the leader of a health think tank, whether he feels similarly. His answer: “Hatred is proportionate to this aggression. But we can’t take false haven in our hatred. Because hatred must be followed by justice. And justice requires victory.”

After [12 months of the horror of Russia’s war on Ukraine](#), I hope for that victory. I grow tired of the question: when will it end? It can end only when Ukraine wins.