

The march of the hypocrites

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn - August 21, 1997

In the Computer Age we still live by the law of the Stone Age: the man with the bigger club is right. But we pretend this isn't so. We don't notice or even suspect it – why, surely our morality progresses together with our civilisation. Professional politicians, meanwhile, have deftly covered certain vices with a civilised veneer.

In the 20th century we have enriched ourselves with innovations in the field of hypocrisy. We find ever more ingenious ways to apply double (triple? quadruple?) standards.

The bloody Yugoslav tragedy has unfolded before our eyes (and is it over yet?). To be sure, blame for it lies with the Communist coterie of Josip Broz Tito, which imposed an arbitrary pattern of internal borders upon the country, trampling on ethnic common sense, and even relocating ethnic masses by force. Yet blame lies also with the venerable community of Western leaders, who – with an angelic naivete – took those false borders seriously, and then hastened at a moment's notice, in a day or two, to recognise the independence of several breakaway republics whose political formation they apparently found to be advantageous. It was these leaders, then, who nudged Yugoslavia toward many gruelling years of civil war; and their position, declared as neutral, was by no means such.

Yugoslavia, with its seven estranged peoples, was told to fall apart as soon as possible. But Bosnia, with its three estranged peoples and vivid memories of Hitlerite Croats slaughtering up to a million Serbs, had to remain united at all costs – the particular insistence of the United States Government. Who can explain the disparity of such an approach?

Another example: the Trans-Dnestr Republic and Abkhazia were deemed illegitimate simply because they were “self-proclaimed”. But which of the CIS countries was not “self-proclaimed”? Kazakhstan? Ukraine? They were immediately and unconditionally recognised as legitimate, even democratic (and the “Ukrainian Popular Self-Defence” Brownshirts continue to march about freely, torches and all). Did not the United States also “self-proclaim” their independence? Meanwhile, the Kurds are not allowed even to self-proclaim. When they are not being squashed by Iraq, with the tacit consent of the United States, then they are being smashed by NATO member Turkey even on non-Turkish territory, while the whole civilised world looks on with utter indifference. Are the Kurds a “superfluous nation” on this earth?

Or take the Crimea and the port city of Sevastopol. Any sober mind on either side would at least agree that the Crimean question is very complex, whereas Ukraine's claim to Sevastopol has no legal base. Yet the US State Department, choosing not to trouble itself with the history of the matter, has continued to assert authoritatively, for six years running, that both the Crimea and Sevastopol are unequivocally the property of Ukraine, end of discussion. Would it presume to speak so categorically on, say, the future of Northern Ireland?

Still another accomplishment of political hypocrisy is apparent in the way in which we conduct “war crimes tribunals.” Wars, for thousands of years, have always been aggravated on both sides by crimes and injustices. In hopes that a just reason might prevail, in order to make sense of war and to punish evil passions and evil deeds, Russia proposed The Hague Convention of 1899.

Yet no sooner did the first war crimes trial take place – the Nazis at Nuremberg – than we saw, elevated high upon the judges' bench, the unblemished administrators of a justice system that during those same years handed over to torture, execution and untimely death tens of millions of innocent lives in its own country.

And if we continue to differentiate between the always inevitable deaths of soldiers at war and the mass killings of undoubtedly peaceful citizens, then by what name shall we call those who, in a matter of minutes, burnt to death 140,000 civilians at Hiroshima alone – justifying the act with the astounding words, “to save the lives of our soldiers?” That President and his entourage were never subjected to trial, and they are remembered as worthy victors. And how shall we name those who, with victory

fully in hand, dispatched a two-day wave of fighter bombers to reduce to ashes beautiful Dresden, a civilian city teeming with refugees? The death toll was not far below Hiroshima, and two orders of magnitude greater than at Coventry. The Coventry bombing, however, was condemned in trial, while the Air Marshal who directed the bombing of Dresden was not only spared the brand of “war criminal,” but towers over the British capital in a monument, as a national hero.

In an age marked by such a flourishing of jurisprudence, we ought to see clearly that a well-considered international law is a law which justly punishes criminals irrespective – irrespective – of their side’s victory or defeat. No such law has yet been created, found a firm footing, or been universally recognised. It follows, then, that The Hague tribunal still lacks sufficient legal authority with respect to its accused and might on occasion lack impartiality. If so, its verdicts would constitute reprisal, not justice. For all the numerous corpses of civilians uncovered in Bosnia, from all the warring parties, no suspects seem to have been found from the safeguarded Muslim side. Finally we might mention this remarkable tactic: The Hague tribunal now hands down indictments in secret, not announcing them publicly. Somewhere, the accused is summoned on a civil matter, and immediately captured – a method beyond even the Inquisition, more worthy of barbarians, circa 3,000 BC.

Perusing the world map, we find many examples of today’s hypocritical double standard. Here is but one more. In the Euro-American expanse, all sorts of integration and partnership are cultivated and nurtured, stretching over lands on the periphery of this space, like Ukraine, willing, even to incorporate faraway Central Asia. At the same time, all sorts of political interference and economic pressure are vigilantly applied in order to derail the very plan of a rapprochement between Belarus and Russia.

And what of NATO expansion? Which, by the way, adds allies who surely will remain apathetic and useless vis-a-vis the Alliance’s global, non-european aims. It is either the traditional Cold War hypnosis, impairing one’s ability to see the powerlessness of Russia, beset by internal troubles. Or, on the contrary, it is extreme far-sightedness on the part of NATO’s leaders. Should the high-tariff strangling of Russian exports (except for coercively cheap natural resource exports) prove insufficient: should the implacable diktat of Russian internal policy (bundled with loans that only enfeeble) prove insufficient as well; there will now be, in reserve; the “neutralisation” of Russia into a comatose state.

I have not the means to guess whether Russia’s current leaders understand this: Most likely they do not: witness their own clumsy participation in that elegant new phenomenon of the “peacekeeping forces” in Bosnia or Tajikistan; or their confused, lost policies regarding the CIS countries, or their doomed attempts to hold on to Chechnya, with reckless disregard for the human cost; witness, finally, their blind inability to find a reasonable and just solution to the controversy over the Kuril Islands.

They see themselves at the helm of the ship of Russian history, but they are not. They do not direct the course of events.

As for those who do, their plans to establish a “final worldwide security” are ephemeral as well. Given human nature we ought never to attain such security. It would be futile, at the very least, to march towards this goal armed with hypocrisy and scheming short-term calculations, as practised by a revolving door of, officials and by the powerful financial circles that back them, Nor can security be bought with any new technical “superinvention” – for no secret lasts.

Only if the creative and active forces of mankind dedicate themselves to finding gradual and effective restraints against the evil facets of human nature to an elevation of our moral consciousness – only then will a faint, distant hope exist. To embark upon this path, and to walk it, requires a penitent, pure heart and the wisdom and willingness to place constraints on one’s own side, to limit oneself even before limiting others. But today that path only elicits an ironic chuckle, if not open ridicule.

If so, don’t bother calling for “world security”.