

The Devil Resurfaces in Ukraine

Putin's war is forcing a re-evaluation of evil in the world and our response to it.

By [Daniel Henninger](#), April 13, 2022 5:49 pm ET

Evil fell into disrepute years ago. Evil implied the possibility of a devil, and both came to be seen as impediments to some forms of private personal behavior. So we demoted evil and expanded the definitions of goodness. But banishing the devil came with a price, which is apparent as the world stares into the abyss of human ruin in Ukraine.

[Vladimir Putin](#)'s scorched-earth tactics resurrect the possibility in the world of an evil that is pure, compelling and undeniable.

The subject of admitting evil has become complex because the fact of living in an era of fluid postmodern definitions means that a clear, traditional understanding of anything is subject to challenge or revision.

We may have agreed that the acts of 9/11 or murderous bombings on Europe's city streets were acts of terror. But the notion that this was Islamic terror became contested quickly, with the dilutive counterargument that the "Islamic" descriptor was inaccurate, unfair or offensive. Simple evil became debatable.

Some events pass into history, or used to, as unchallengeable evil, such as Nazism's extermination camps for Jews. Only the kind of people who meet in sewers would still attempt to deny that.

While there are events since then that qualify as evil, say, Cambodia's killing fields in the 1970s, Vladimir Putin's Ukrainian killing fields arrived, apparently, as a shocker. No one quite expected *this* to happen anymore. No one could imagine a missile with "for the children" written on it aimed at a train station.

In our time, especially the past 10 or so years in the United States, notions of what constitutes evil have been reinterpreted and distanced from individual responsibility. Evil had become oddly euphemized. Acts of murder, including mass murder, are less about the evil acts of individuals and more about their “guns.” On Monday President Biden gave a stirring speech about [a federal plan to control “ghost guns.”](#)

Climate change, a scientific phenomenon, has risen to become the “existential threat to humanity” (as per Mr. Biden again and countless others).

This is not to say these concerns are illegitimate but only to note how far the matters we consider important have drifted toward complex abstractions. One might call it the issuefication of morality.

Crime, identity, race, fossil fuels—all have become “issues” whose amorphous, endlessly debatable content ensures they are never resolved. They run on and on—as “issues.”

New York City is currently in the midst of a crisis—personal and political—about crime. Serious crime across all major categories is up 41% [in the past year](#). What’s striking to New Yorkers is how unhinged the violence has become, and how routine. Tuesday’s horrific [shooting spree on a Brooklyn subway](#) has put the city in a state of shock.

Street violence, as we are experiencing in many U.S. cities, has tipped past mere crime into something more disturbing—an exhilarating mania of destruction and death.

The people at risk of this unrestrained violence know they are in the presence of evil, but New York’s state Legislature spent last week debating marginal changes to its bail laws—an “issue.” Even the phrase “hate crimes” is a politicized distancing from the raw malignancy inside these assaults.

Years of defining evil down have disabled the political system’s ability to act decisively when evil appears. And that puts us at personal, public and national risk.

The importance of the war in Ukraine is that it is forcing a re-evaluation of evil and our response to it, and our willingness to admit its reality.

A “distancing” theme of the Ukraine war is that the West provoked it by moving the North Atlantic Treaty Organization eastward. But NATO has little to do with the reality that Mr. Putin himself has spent years murdering his political opponents or demolishing cities like Grozny (1999-2000) and Aleppo (2016).

The essential reality of the Putin evil is that whatever historical grievances have been coursing through Mr. Putin’s brain, they have taken form as the mass killing of innocent human beings and the conscious destruction of the pedestrian, physical order of Ukrainians’ daily lives. For this, no sophisticated rationalization is possible. It is evil.

If the leader of China, Xi Jinping, is willing to put members of the Uyghur minority in concentration camps or imprison dissidents after sham trials, we should recognize that politics alone is an insufficient explanation for his intentions and what he’s willing to do.

As justification, both Messrs. Putin and Xi have put into play ideas about national destiny and an offending Western liberalism. But the Xi-Putin [partnership announced in February](#) isn’t just about ideological or economic competition. It’s about a shared, proven willingness to pursue anti-human policies, including murder, to achieve their ends.

Opinions on the nature of evil have differed since at least the Garden of Eden. But I’m pretty sure that the events since Feb. 24 in Ukraine have taught us this: If you give the devil a chance, he will try to destroy you.

Write henninger@wsj.com.