



# Teaching in a war

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## Abstract

This paper describes the realities of wartime, teaching about literature online, and extending care to students.

## Keywords

reality of war, teaching online, pedagogy of care, literature

Teaching (and studying) in a war is something you never prepared for. There was no IN A WAR 101 option on the course lists at the University of Toronto where I studied for my BA. War was always somewhere else, distant, in the movies. *Full Metal Jacket*, for instance. War was hell, of course, albeit a virtual one. A barrel of popcorn always helped digest things. Then, in the early hours of February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2022, a real war began for me, as it did for millions of other Ukrainians. When you look out of your window into the still dark morning sky and see flashes of explosions accompanied by sounds of blasts, distant and near, the last thing you think of is how to prepare for your morning class, all due respect to the importance of Hunter Thompson for the new journalism, as was planned that morning.

Now into the third year of the war (Russia actually first invaded Ukraine in March 2014, the beginning of today's war). But, apart from the militarised *theft* of Crimea, as I prefer to call it, and an invasion of parts of eastern Ukraine, a wholesale war seemed like an unreal possibility, although in hindsight, it should have been seen as entirely predictable), I can't even remember when we returned to classes, online of course. It was probably four or five weeks after the dust had settled, so to speak, following the first weeks of Russia's all-out invasion. By that time our students and academic staff had dispersed to all over Ukraine and other parts of the world, near and far. Some, like me, had stayed, in my case in Kyiv. The [Russians] (apologies for the political incorrectness, as it happens, it's a by-product of war. Images of destroyed apartment buildings, a bombed theatre with thousands sheltering in it, likewise a maternity hospital... and not only images... former students killed on the front-lines, my wife's actress colleague killed by Russian shelling in her Kyiv apartment, the lighting designer of our theatre injured at the front... will do that to you) had been 20 kilometres from the city centre. We returned to classes because we

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understood we had to. Life had to go on. We soon realised (given Russian-Ukrainian history this shouldn't have been a surprise) that the *Russian way of waging war* also included targeting and destroying everything that had to do with Ukrainian culture and its markers. It now became coldly clear that previously circulating rumours of our academic staff having been put on Russian death lists, something that I had scoffed at prior to 24/2, were chillingly true.

Resistance was now the only option. If they were out to destroy us and our identity, we would fight back, intently continuing what we had been doing and trying to invent new ways of putting up a fight. The *show had to go on*. Or, to put it more colourfully, and to paraphrase the Ukrainian serviceman on Snake Island, the attitude on all levels now became *Russia, go f\*\*\* yourself*. Political correctness would take a time out...

## The Prelude

Although I had never taken IN A WAR 101, there was previous *practice as research*. This practice had included being a participant in the revolutions of 2004 and 2013-14 in Ukraine, specifically in Kyiv. Both the *Orange Revolution* and more so the *Revolution of Dignity*, had been hardcore wake-up calls and dress rehearsals. As a university and education system, we had learned how to exist in new realities fraught with danger and violence. On both occasions *we the people* had prevailed, and as a university we adapted. The *been there, done that* experience served as psychological and motivational preparation for the controlled panic and sheer mass scale violence and destruction following 02/24. On another front, the Covid online experience of teaching-learning proved to be invaluable in the new reality. We, like universities throughout the world, had developed means and methods to deal with the new *virtual way of doing things*. Looking back, we did quite well. Despite the nay-sayers, the Covid years had proved that it was possible to continue the existence of a genuine university experience for students online, albeit with limitations, although, it must be said, with new possibilities as well. Marshall McLuhan must have been approvingly nodding from up above...

The most immediate of concerns following 24/2 were safety related. When online classes resumed, students and staff found themselves all across and outside of Ukraine in a myriad of circumstances. Some were among the millions of Ukrainians who had fled Ukraine, anticipating the worst. Many had found refuge in western Ukraine, further away from the menacing Russian presence just outside of Kyiv and our university, and the by now regular deadly rocket attacks. Some of our community had lost their homes in areas now under occupation. Horrifically, some found themselves in occupied areas. Some were in uniform with weapons in hands in trenches, tanks, and medical evacuation vehicles, defending against the enemy.

Before an online class would begin I would first ask if everyone was okay and safe, stressing that at any point during the class/seminar if air raid sirens would warn us of a possible attack here in Kyiv, or wherever anyone might be, the class would be stopped or a student could/should log off. Nothing was more important than seeking safety during an imminent rocket or other sort of attack. As a result, sometimes classes were postponed or cut short. Contingency plans included continuing/rescheduling/finding replacements for missed classes. The key guiding principle was flexibility. Like everything that was happening all around, a way always had to be found, there were no other options. At times alternative ways proved to be unexpected and highly creative. Communication took place on various levels including our university's official

Messenger/Teams platforms along with a myriad of social media or an old-school smartphone conversation. It all not only seemed to work, it *did* work. Despite glitches of all sorts, courses were taught, assignments were completed, grades were assigned, diplomas were issued.

The continuation of the educational process became possible because of pre 24/2 accumulated momentum along with a firm new *resolve* that by doing our best we were helping to foil the enemy's plans to intimidate and destroy us. Tragically, our resolve would be increasingly fuelled every single time *the bell tolled* for yet another member of our community who had given their life so that we could continue...

During an online class you would never know where students were and in what circumstances, but also what they and those close to them had experienced and were experiencing. The social networks would bring news of individual trauma and tragedy within the community, in addition to that among family and friends. Staying up late at night, waking up during it when the sirens would start wailing or the acutely tense moments with very loud explosions happening overhead, windows shaking, even your building swaying, like in an earthquake (I had experienced two of them, thankfully minor, so knew the feeling) meant reaching for the smartphone to check news platforms/Facebook/Telegram/Whatsapp... to know what was occurring *live*... Same thing every morning, you had to know what had happened and was happening. Each tragedy gut-wrenching, each military achievement or news of support from the outside world a blessing. That day in class online you would keep everything in mind, asking yourself who of your students may be going through what and reminding yourself to retain the utmost of sensitivity during the course of a class. Anything potentially could and did trigger emotional responses, based on fear, despair, anger, or *hatred of the enemy*. In no way would I act as a censor, attempting to suggest appropriate responses. Every person had their own valid truth. The best I could do, I felt, was to continue as I always had been in class, humour included (in my early days as a young uni prof a student had once told me I should be a stand-up comedian, not sure that was a compliment, but I chose to think that it was) hoping that my plodding on would at the very least contribute to an *illusion of normalcy* in a devastatingly abnormal situation.

## The Read

One of the first aftermaths of the beginning of the war in 2014 was a reconsideration of what we read in my courses. Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* and Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse 5* (among others) had been mainstays for years in my 20<sup>th</sup> century American novel course. For the first time in literally decades, I found myself at a loss. How would I discuss these novels when some of my former and current students were simultaneously at a very real front, not the intellectually virtual and safe one in academic discussions? I did probably the simplest thing I could do and removed these books from my fall 2014 course reading list, replacing them with others by the same authors. I, to paraphrase Vonnegut himself, did not know *what language* I could use in discussing a virtual war while a real one was occurring, with very real people dying. It was difficult to be intellectually *post-modern* when the chips were really down. Ten years into the war, I'm still looking for a way discuss war in literature... *and so it goes*.

"To tell you the truth, Hem... I've never read the Rooshians", is what Ezra Pound tells the surprised narrator-Hemingway in *A Moveable Feast*, when the latter expresses his admiration for Russian literature ("At first there were the Russians; then there were all the

others... for a long time there were the Russians", and adds "keep to the French... You've plenty to learn there". This *Russians as a separate and superior* paradigm reflected the colonial relationship in Russian-Ukrainian cultural relations for decades, indeed centuries. Above all else there was Russian literature and culture, to be worshiped and copied. The best the Ukrainians (and other colonised nation republics of the USSR) could do was be inspired to produce (inferior) emulations.

The first ever university course I taught was a course on Dostoevsky at the University of Ottawa in the early 1980s. I thought much of the author at the time as I later did of Nabokov, incorporating his texts into my teaching at NaUKMA in the early 2000s. But there was always an uneasy feeling with both Russian writers with their attitude to everything Ukrainian. "When I want a good nightmare, I imagine Gogol penning in Little Russian dialect volume after volume...", is how Nabokov put it, deliberately referring to the Ukrainian language as a *Little Russian dialect*.

By Spring 2014, with Russia's first attack on Ukraine, it was over for me. I was no longer willing to include a Russian (albeit as an *American*) writer on a reading list in a course, no matter how great his work may be. He could be replaced by someone equally great, without the toxicity. I was not the only practitioner of this example of *cancelling* Russian writers and other examples of culture in our community at the time, as a *self-defence mechanism*. Questions were continuing to be raised by many. Why all the Pushkin monuments, why Gorky streets, why a Bulgakov museum in the centre of Kyiv? Why the colonial markers all across our physical and cultural landscapes?

Russian propagandists continued to utter the official line, indeed, part of their justification for unleashing the largest attack on a sovereign state since WWII: *Russia is where the Russian language and culture are*. Under occupation, parts of Ukraine were ravaged by wide-scale destruction of cultural landmarks: libraries, schools, museums... The Mariupol Drama Theatre would become a tragic symbol of this devastation: After killing thousands sheltering inside in a rocket attack, including many children, the Russians wrapped the ruins of the theatre with banners of Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy... Any attempts in *Western* arguments to argue *Pushkin not Putin* would just not cut it anymore. Neither would the *culture outside of politics argument*. When the invader's cultural and language politics are aimed at conveying a violent *in your face* message that you don't exist, a *cultural just war*, with monument removal, cancelling, and new laws favouring the Ukrainian language constitute the *only* effective response. It truly became a to be or not to be matter of survival for us, or as in an Australian update, *just stayin' alive*. In result I along with many of my colleagues *won't be reading or teaching the Rooshians* any time soon.

I'm writing this at a time when normalcy outwardly deceives. People are having coffee in cafes in Kyiv, theatre attendance is booming, we'll go back to classes again in a month. But the deadly attacks continue. It's a *new normalcy*, if you will, that combines *seemingly normal life* with continued rocket strikes, death, and destruction. Sometimes all within a 24-hour period. Does one get used to such normalcy? In a way. You don't know what tomorrow will bring. The old cliché *one day at a time* takes on new meaning. We'll be back in classes in September, learning, teaching, researching... all the while continuing to gesture at the Russians with our *f\*\*\* you*.

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