

FRAGMENTS ABOUT THE WAR

BY GEORGI GOSPODINOV

AND WE ARE ALL FATHERS AND MOTHERS AGAIN

In the beginning, when I first saw the reports of the bombing, the broken streets, and the tanks, I had the feeling that I was watching old Russian footage from the war, a black-and-white documentary from the archive about World War II. We grew up on these films. At first the mind can't accept that it's all happening here and now, with today's people in today's cities. In fact, these shots, though in color, are almost black and white—the grays, blacks, and whites of burned houses, muddy roads, charred tanks and machinery, smoky grayish-white horizons—the colors of all wars. The discoloration of the world.

According to a recent Russian statistical poll, 60 percent approve of the war against Ukraine (or the special operation—the word “war” is forbidden). And 88 percent want to live together with the Ukrainians. Probably with the survivors. What is this schizophrenia anyway? To invade them and love them? To attack them because we love them? To attack them so they will love us? In fact, any simple theory of bully and victim will explain this madness in everyday terms. The domestic abuser usually thinks that the problems of love and peaceful coexistence are most easily solved with two to three slaps; I'm talking about the easy cases.

Okay, let's say you take over this country and stay there to guard what you've taken over. How are you going to walk down those streets that you blew up with your shells? How will you sleep in those buildings that you destroyed? How will you look into the eyes of the people whose loved ones you killed? How will you keep order in the city after you

have crossed that line? How will you explain to your own children back home why you are gone and what you've been doing while away from home? How will you manage to lie to yourself that these are not human beings, that they deserved it, that they did it to themselves? ...

Artillery shells can produce death and fear, rockets and incendiary bombs produce death and fear, tanks produce death and fear ... What are you going to do with these piles of death and piles of fear? How are you going to clear them away; how are you going to save yourself from the radiation that they will emit for decades?

You can take over cities, but you can't hold them. You can win the war, but you can't win the people.

A Ukrainian woman from Kyiv says: “I tell my aunt, who is in Moscow, that a war is going on and that we are hiding in shelters, and she says, ‘nonsense, they're lying to you on your TV.’”

What irony! In our media-saturated world, we know less about what's happening in the neighboring country during a war. Propaganda has proved to be more powerful than a personal story. The aunt doesn't believe her niece who is calling her from the bomb shelter of her building that has been hit by a missile. But they don't show this building on auntie's TV in Moscow, and, therefore, Moscow does not believe in tears (to recall the title of an old Russian movie).

We are helping some friends take in a Ukrainian family. The family consists of nine members from different generations, and three cats. Only one of the cats is theirs; they took the other two at their neighbors' request. No one counts the animals that have been killed during the war, nor those

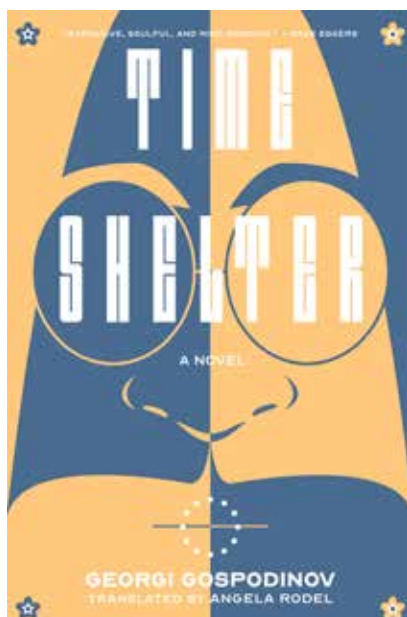
Photo by
Dirk Skiba

who emigrated. We have not got that far. They are the other invisible victims and refugees in this war. (Ukraine is among the first in the world when it comes to the number of domestic cats.) Animals that by nature are pure are even more vulnerable to our political atrocities.

If nature is the mother of humanity, then every war commits matricide.

And how easily, insultingly easily, the thin red line is crossed, the line that until yesterday kept people sane. Yesterday—everyday life, with all its details; today—war. Time has abruptly hit the brakes, the tires squeal, and veers in another direction or turns back. And the days are no longer days. And the nights are no longer nights. Sirens, shelters, anxious insomnia ... Time doesn't just change direction, it changes (and this is not a metaphor) almost physically its duration, its rhythm, its consistency. Yesterday's tasks and plans for today have become insignificant and bizarre—having coffee with H., going to the dentist, going to the theater in the evening. Repetition, rhythm, and a little bit of boredom for luxury—that's what everyday life is made of. It's all in the garbage now. Someone has replaced our days; someone has replaced our lives. Especially for those who are in the war. But also for those who are around, still on the outside, the next ...

That's how everyday life abruptly became history.



Dustjacket for the U.S. edition of Georgi Gospodinov's *Time Shelter*, translated by Angela Rodel (Liveright, 2022)

And yet sometimes everyday life breaks through. I see people in the neighborhood collecting humanitarian aid—mainly baby diapers, sanitary napkins, clothes, canned goods. I walk into the nearby pharmacy. The sanitary pads are on the shelf; I pick up some packages without understanding much, but I don't find any diapers and decide to ask. Do you have baby diapers? The pharmacist looks at me a bit puzzled in a "What can you expect of them? Men!" kind of way and says gruffly, "At least tell me how many kilos the kid is ..." Well, I don't know, I don't know the baby ... I think that finally does her in. Then I quickly add that it's for Ukraine, and everything falls into place. I walk out with the packages and feel like a newborn father. On days like this, we apparently are all fathers and mothers again.

The phrase "Let history show ..." becomes absolutely meaningless in the face of a nuclear threat. History can only show us ... if there is history. Besides, nuclear war kills history. How ironic! On the first day after the apocalypse there will be no media. The most important event in human history will go unreported.

"Everyone here is suffering from a loss of the sense of time," writes Zbigniew Herbert in his poem "Report from the Besieged City."

Will there really be "time" after the nuclear end of the world? Clearly, there will be no everyday life. It seems to me that it is no coincidence that most Russians took the withdrawal of IKEA from Russia as a particular injustice. Precisely because someone is pulling everyday life out from under their feet. How so? IKEA is the idea of home—all the sofas, wardrobes, beds, kitchen cabinets, and children's rooms. It's the room of the world. You're chasing me out of your rooms and mine at the same time.

"I want to go back home, I want to go home, I don't want to go anywhere," cries a Ukrainian woman at the border. And there is no home. Life has shrunk; the world has shrunk to the size of a bomb shelter.

Shelter will probably be the word of the year. Let's hope it's not bomb shelter.

WHAT TO TELL MY DAUGHTER TONIGHT

Have we really come this far? ... Going to war in Europe, putting bomb shelters back into service—bomb shelters ... Once again to fill with blood what we thought of as history and literature.

I dealt at length with the discrete monster of the past and 1939 in my last novel, *Time Shelter*. It ends with a scene of a detailed reenactment of the beginning of World War II. The troops are gathered at the border, waiting. Suddenly, a real gunshot is fired from the reenactment and ...

I want to say once more, from my perspective as a writer, that no war with and for the past has ever been won. No war can ever be won. War impairs human time; it impairs humanity as a whole. It erases layers of culture from Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle through Shakespeare and Goethe to Chekhov and Brodsky ...

Putin wants to bring Europe back, first, to a point before 1997, then before the disintegration of the USSR in 1991, but in fact he wants to go back to 1939. Will we always be on the verge of 1939? Even the timing of the attack this morning is the same as on September 1. When does everyday life turn into history (again) ...? And why—after all that has already been? Somehow we didn't get the story right. We were sure it couldn't happen again, not in a Europe that had lived through two wars. Despite all the books and films, despite all the archives and conversations, it turned out we hadn't understood. Or we had forgotten. We have a bad case of social Alzheimer's. This war broke out at a time when the bearers of the living memory of World War II are no longer among us. Today we find ourselves on that generational boundary, when the last participants who kept that memory alive, the last survivors of the death camps, the last soldiers from the trenches are no more. And many people again like dictators.

Some days shift something in the machinery of history, and today, unfortunately, is one of those days. Everyone will remember where they were, what they were doing. As on September 1, as on September 11, as today ...

Everyday life must remain everyday life.

The news reports show people seeking out bomb shelters ... Damn, I had thought that the word "bomb shelter" was something that would need to be explained for young readers in a footnote. I insisted in my novel that we would be looking for more and more time shelters. And it was supposed to sound

like a dystopia, a warning about the future. I had chosen the year 2039, exactly one hundred years after World War II. Things have gone irredeemably backward when dystopian novels start turning into documentaries. My dystopia is democratic, after all. Countries in Europe choose by referendum to which year of the 20th century they will return. Referendums for the past. Today Putin turns back the clock without offering any choice. With this war, he is turning the 21st century back to the 20th century. And he is deciding it not only for his own country, but for a neighboring country, for all of Europe, and perhaps the world. You cannot forcibly return anyone to the dungeon of the past, not an individual, much less entire nations.

And what will I tell my daughter tonight, after promising her every evening that there will be no war? What can we say to our children? How can we explain that the world's nursery is not ready for them?

"We need to clean out the basement," my wife said. It's a good thing there's running water downstairs; we might spend a long time down there. ■

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Georgi Gospodinov is the Fall 2022 Harriman Institute Writer in Residence. A writer, poet, and playwright based in Sofia, Bulgaria, he has been described by The New Yorker's Garth Greenwell as a "trickster at heart, and often very funny," while Dave Eggers has called him "one of Europe's most fascinating and irreplaceable novelists." Gospodinov's second novel, The Physics of Sorrow (Open Letter, 2011), catapulted Gospodinov to the front ranks of Europe's most inventive and daring writers, garnering him the Angelus Central European Literature Award and the Jan Michalski Prize for Literature. His third novel, Time Shelter (Liveright, 2022), was hailed by The Times as "a genre-busting novel of ideas" and received Italy's prestigious Premio Strega Europeo. Visit Gospodinov's personal website at georgigospodinov.com.

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