

The quest for the Ukrainian “Araucana”. The case for the humanization of the Orc

*En búsqueda de la ‘Araucana’ ucraniana.
Argumentos para humanizar al Orco*

FRANCISCO LOBO*

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Abstract

The decade-long armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine (2014-2024) has been characterized legally and politically in different ways, such as a war of self-defense against external aggression to uphold the rules-based international order, or a war of national liberation against occupation and full-scale invasion by an imperialist power. On a social level, the rhetoric or language used by the immediately affected parties reveals the need to construct the conflict also as an existential fight between good and evil whereby the enemy is dehumanized by referring to them as “orcs.” Yet, this rhetoric could prove counter-productive as both a matter of principle and expediency. As a matter of principle, the same rules-based international order for which this just war of self-defense is being fought requires the humane treatment of the enemy. As a matter of expediency, the demeaning label “orc” risks being reclaimed by the enemy as a source of national pride and cultural identity, thus bolstering their will to fight and making a return to peace more difficult. The humanization of the enemy as both the right thing to do and the more convenient course of action is the best approach not only to win the war, but to fight and win well. The methodology used consists of textual analysis and philosophical argument drawing on primary and secondary sources. The former include historical works from both Hispanic and Ukrainian literature, namely the epic

* PhD (War Studies), LLM (International Legal Studies). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8188-5717>. Correo: francisco.lopez@kcl.ac.uk.

poem “La Araucana” (1569-1578-1590) by Alonso de Ercilla, and “Eneida” (1798) by Ivan Kotlyarevsky, a parody of the epic poem written by Virgil. Secondary sources include works of history, sociology, philosophy, law and ethics, as well as epic fantasy, namely J.R.R. Tolkien’s “The Lord of the Rings” and Kirill Eskov’s “The Last Ringbearer”.

Keywords: Ukraine, Russia, war of aggression, imperialism, orcs, epic poetry, epic fantasy, La Araucana, Eneida, The Lord of the Rings, The Last Ringbearer

Resumen

El conflicto armado de una década entre Rusia y Ucrania (2014-2024) ha sido caracterizado legal y políticamente de diversas maneras, como una guerra de autodefensa contra una agresión externa para mantener el orden internacional basado en reglas, o como una guerra de liberación nacional contra la ocupación y la invasión a gran escala por parte de una potencia imperialista. A nivel social, la retórica o el lenguaje utilizado por las partes directamente afectadas revela la necesidad de construir el conflicto también como una lucha existencial entre el bien y el mal, en la que el enemigo es deshumanizado al referirse a él como “orcós”. Sin embargo, esta retórica podría resultar contraproducente, tanto por principios como por conveniencia. En cuanto a principios, el mismo orden internacional basado en reglas por el que se lucha esta justa guerra de autodefensa exige el trato humano del enemigo. En cuanto a conveniencia, el uso despectivo del término “orco” corre el riesgo de ser reclamado por el enemigo como una fuente de orgullo nacional e identidad cultural, lo que fortalecería su voluntad de luchar y haría más difícil el retorno a la paz. La humanización del enemigo, tanto como el curso de acción correcto como el más conveniente, es el mejor enfoque no solo para ganar la guerra, sino para luchar y ganar bien. La metodología utilizada consiste en análisis textual y argumentación filosófica, basándose en fuentes primarias y secundarias. Las primeras incluyen obras históricas tanto de la literatura hispana como ucraniana, a saber, el poema épico “La Araucana” (1569-1578-1590) de Alonso de Ercilla, y “Eneida” (1798) de Ivan Kotlyarevsky, una parodia del poema épico escrito por Virgilio. Las fuentes secundarias incluyen obras de historia, sociología, filosofía, derecho y ética, así como fantasía épica, concretamente “El Señor de los Anillos” de J.R.R. Tolkien y “El último portador del Anillo” de Kirill Eskov.

Palabras claves: Ucrania, Rusia, guerra de agresión, imperialismo, orcos, poesía épica, fantasía épica, La Araucana, Eneida, El Señor de los Anillos, El último portador del anillo.

“Popular culture, from soaps to pulp fiction, is an area that has long been under-researched, dismissed as trash or propaganda unworthy of analysis, despite its importance to creating a shared identity, sense of meaning and purpose for society”.

Jade McGlynn, *Russia’s War*

I. Introduction

“*FIGHT for the Third Assault*”. The call to arms can be found in recruitment posters placed all over Kyiv, especially in residential areas. Above the exhortation, the image of a defiant Ukrainian soldier in full gear confronted face to face with a horrid creature with a fierce expression and the letter “Z” on its arm.¹

A military patch at a souvenir store in the capital of Ukraine reads “Orc Hunter,” with the head of a monster with pointy ears and a “Z” tattooed on its forehead pierced by an arrow as its emblem.

A story on the training of female volunteers in the Ukrainian military run by a popular European news network shows how the instructor tells the women to fire their weapons at targets symbolizing Russian politicians and an additional character: “[an] orc.”²

As the defensive war against Russia’s aggression reaches its tenth anniversary since the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, and its second anniversary as an all-out armed conflict since the full-scale invasion in 2022, these are familiar sights found in the landscape of Ukrainian war-torn society. It is a war that is being waged not only with hardware and firepower, but also with the concomitance of other instruments of national power – namely economic, financial, diplomatic, intelligence, informational and legal maneuvers³ (the latter including a unique national lawfare program to fend off Russian aggression⁴).

It is also a war that is being waged with words, an appropriate weapon of choice to fight back as Russian aggressive force is coupled with cultural devices such as “linguicide”⁵ policies that go back centuries. Indeed, not only new terms have been coined in Ukraine to refer to the invaders, for example, the portmanteau “ruscist”

1 <https://ab3.army/en/> (last visited: 11 January 2024).

2 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9mnOrL23YcE> (last visited: 11 January 2024).

3 Jeremy Weber, ‘Playing the Midfield,’ <https://www.jagreporter.af.mil/Portals/88/2019%20Articles/Documents/20191104%20Weber-Midfield.pdf> (last visited: 11 January 2024).

4 Francisco Lobo, ‘Defensive Lawfare as a Shield Against Global Authoritarianism,’ (last visited: 23 February 2024).

5 Olena Siruk, ‘A guide to the history of oppression of the Ukrainian language,’ <https://chytomo.com/en/a-guide-to-the-history-of-oppression-of-the-ukrainian-language/> (last visited: 12 January 2024).

combining “Russian” and “fascist.”⁶ Household expressions taken from popular culture have also been weaponized in a particularly salient way, from common discourse even to official statements and documents, most notably the term “orcs” to signify Russian invaders.⁷ This can be traced back at least to the 2013–2014 Revolution of Dignity and the Euromaidan massive protests, when Yanukovich’s brutally repressive security forces were referred to also as “orcs.”⁸ Accordingly, Volodymyr Zelensky himself pronounced in 2017 this famous words in season 2 of the momentous TV show *Servant of the People*, vindicating Ukrainian autonomy and pride: “We’re not a border region between orcs and elves.”⁹ Thus, Ukrainian society has arguably been fighting the cultural battle that we may call the “Orc Wars,” thus echoing Mykola Mikhnovsky’s words written already in 1900: “All generations of Ukrainians will go to war. The battle will be carried out using all possible means, with the cultural battle considered just as appropriate as the physical.”¹⁰

This rhetoric or narrative reveals the need to construct the conflict as an existential fight between good and evil whereby the enemy is dehumanized by referring to them as “orcs.” This is more than understandable given the high stakes for Ukraine as a country whose very existence is being denied by the aggressor. Such a Manichean approach may be also explained as a psychological technique to inspire citizens to join the depleted Ukrainian forces as the country enters the third year of the full-scale invasion.¹¹ Yet, it is worth bearing in mind that dehumanization is a two-way street that can also result in the depiction of Ukrainians as evil in the eyes of the invaders. As a recent media study shows: “Ukrainians are routinely referred to as Nazis, fascists, and terrorists. Ukrainians are depicted as intent on destroying the Russian people, their language, and their religious traditions.”¹²

6 Timothy Snyder, ‘The War in Ukraine has Unleashed a New Word,’ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/22/magazine/ruscism-ukraine-russia-war.html> (last visited: 11 January 2024).

7 Mansur Mirovalev, “Orcs” and “Rashists”: Ukraine’s new language of war,’ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/5/3/orcs-and-rashists-ukraines-new-language-of-war> (last visited: 11 January 2024); Zoya Sheftalovich, ‘The Rashists from Mordor vs. the Tractor Troops: Ukraine’s new language of war,’ <https://www.politico.eu/article/rashists-mordor-tractor-troops-ukraines-new-language-of-war/> (last visited: 11 January 2024); John Moretti, “Soldiers Repelled Orc Attack” – Ukraine Counteroffensive Update for Nov 7 (Europe Edition),’ <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/23748> (last visited: 11 January 2024); Office of the President of Ukraine, ‘Address by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on the Day of Defenders of Ukraine,’ <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/zvernennya-prezidenta-volodimira-zelenskogo-z-nagodi-dnya-za-85993> (last visited: 11 January 2024).

8 Borja Las Heras, *Estación Ucrania. El país que fue* (Madrid: Libros del K.O., 2022), p. 19

9 Chris Taylor, ‘Zelensky’s show matters more than ever. Let’s see it all,’ <https://mashable.com/article/zelensky-servant-people-how-to-watch> (last visited 3 September 2024).

10 Mykola Mikhnovsky, ‘An Independent Ukraine (excerpt),’ in Ralph Lindheim and George S.N. Luckyj (eds.), *Towards an Intellectual History of Ukraine* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), p. 213.

11 Lilia Rzhetska, ‘Ukraine to shake up recruitment as new soldiers prove scarce,’ <https://www.dw.com/en/ukraine-to-shake-up-recruitment-as-troops-prove-scarce/a-67348780> (last visited: 11 January 2024); Thomas Gibbons-Neff, “People Snatchers”: Ukraine’s Recruiters Use Harsh Tactics to Fill Ranks,’ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/15/world/europe/ukraine-military-recruitment.html> (last visited: 11 January 2024).

12 Jade McGlynn, ‘Russian Propaganda Tactics in Wartime Ukraine,’ <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1xdkm4Mn2G-IN5Whijjuv7sCqMbE-LT3Y/view> (last visited: 18 January 2024), p. 17.

This rhetoric could further prove counter-productive as both a matter of principle and expediency. As a matter of principle, the same rules-based international order for which this just war of self-defense is being fought requires the humane treatment of the enemy under the rules of war articulated in International Humanitarian Law. As a matter of expediency, the demeaning label “orc” risks being reclaimed by the enemy as a source of national pride and cultural identity, thus bolstering their will to fight and making a return to peace more difficult. The humanization of the enemy as both the right thing to do and the more convenient course of action is the best approach not only to win the war, but to fight and win well.

In this article, I explore the narrative of the Orc Wars in order to ascertain its origins and normative implications for the current armed conflict in Ukraine. I begin by probing the psychological need to dehumanize the enemy in every political confrontation, up to and including war, such that hostile behavior and violence may be carried out more easily by those involved (II). In the next section I analyze the downside to this psychological device, namely, that sometimes it can bolster the resolve of the enemy and can become a source of pride and an element to build their own identity, as illustrated, most notably, by the popular Russian work of fiction “*The Last Ringbearer*”. This reclaiming of the label “orc” comes with risks of its own for Ukrainians, which I unpack too in this section (III). The remainder of the article consists of inter-textual analysis whereby I explore the possibility that the key to rehumanizing the “orc” may be contained in the same work of fiction that reappropriates the label, “*The Last Ringbearer*”, as it connects to two post-colonial epic poems of Chilean and Ukrainian origin analyzed in the subsequent sections, “*La Araucana*” (IV) and “*Eneida*” (V), such that the “Ukrainian Araucana” may be conceived of as a path toward the re-humanization of the enemy, thus upholding the rules and principles we all hold dear (V). Finally, I offer some concluding remarks.

II. The need: Making a monster

The deliberate use of demeaning terms and even racial slurs to refer to the enemy in times of war is nothing new. “Barbarians,” “Huns,” “Jerries,” “Krauts,” “Japs,” “Slants,” “Gooks,” “Hadjis,” and “Cockroaches,” among others, have all been used at some point in the history of warfare.¹³ As Dave Grossman, author of the famous psychological study “*On Killing*,” explains, there is a need to overcome the strong universal phobia human beings experience against taking the life of another human being even in combat situations: “It is so much easier to kill someone if they look distinctly different from you. If your propaganda machine can convince your soldiers that their opponents are

¹³ Robin Tolmach Lakoff, ‘From Ancient Greece to Iraq, the Power of Words in Wartime,’ <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/18/science/essay-from-ancient-greece-to-iraq-the-power-of-words-in-wartime.html> (last visited: 12 January 2024).

not really humans but are ‘inferior forms of life,’ then their natural resistance to killing their own species will be reduced” (original emphasis).¹⁴

This is also reflected in what has been called the myth of pure evil in moral philosophy, used to explain how human beings are capable of the most dreadful acts. As Steven Pinker remarks when reflecting on the origin of our better angels and our darkest demons:

“The myth of pure evil gives rise to an archetype that is common in religions, horror movies, children’s literature, nationalist mythologies, and sensationalist news coverage. In many religions evil is personified as the Devil – Hades, Satan, Beelzebub, Lucifer, Mephistopheles – or as the antithesis to a benevolent God in a bilateral Manichean struggle. In popular fiction evil takes the form of the slasher, the serial killer, the bogeyman, the ogre, the Joker, the James Bond villain, or depending on the cinematic decade, the Nazi officer, Soviet spy, Italian gangster, Arab terrorist, inner-city predator, Mexican druglord, galactic emperor, or corporate executive.”¹⁵

The devices used to shape this monstrous side of our human nature abound, indeed, in popular culture. As Jade McGlynn points out in her recent study of Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine, popular culture, although under-researched, can be an important source of identity, meaning and purpose for society.¹⁶ For example, a particularly compelling illustration of the myth of pure evil as a tool of dehumanization can be found in one episode of the dystopian TV show “*Black Mirror*,” titled “*Men Against Fire*” in which futuristic soldiers are technologically conditioned to believe that their targets are literal cockroach-like mutants.¹⁷

When it comes to the orc rhetoric in particular, in recent years the label has been weaponized in the Hispanic world by far-right camps and commentators¹⁸ to disparage social justice movements and citizen activism.¹⁹ For instance, former Argentine President Mauricio Macri recently expressed his hope that “orcs” will not spoil the implementation of pro free market policies by Javier Milei’s new administration.²⁰ Also interestingly, a right-wing congressman in Chile reportedly referred to protesters

¹⁴ Dave Grossman, *On Killing* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1996), p. 161.

¹⁵ Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of our Nature* (New York: Penguin, 2012), p. 496.

¹⁶ Jade McGlynn, *Russia’s War* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2023), p. 86.

¹⁷ <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5709234/> (last visited: 12 January 2024).

¹⁸ Ángel Bonet, ‘Los Orcos,’ <https://www.angelbonet.com/orcos/> (last visited: 12 January 2024).

¹⁹ Rocco Carbone, ‘Orcos y trosocos,’ <https://lateclaenerevista.com/orcos-y-trosocos-por-rocco-carbone/> (last visited: 12 January 2024).

²⁰ https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=X7xMVVO_Bnc (last visited: 12 January 2024).

during the 2019 constitutional crisis in that country as “orcs.”²¹ Since Chileans also thought of their own fight as one motivated by dignity,²² it is not unconscionable to think that had the Euromaidan protests happened in Chile, the protesters would most likely have been referred to as orcs by conservatives.

Thus, although they are creatures taken from fiction, orcs appear to be a part of the political landscape in some contemporary societies. However, J.R.R. Tolkien, author of *The Lord of the Rings* and arguably the man responsible for popularizing orcs and all sorts of other fantastic creatures that have captivated the public imagination, never intended to identify orcs with any particular community or group in real life, such as Germans (against whom he fought in the trenches during World War I) or Soviets.²³ How then did the current use of the expression in the war in Ukraine come to be?

Russian war crimes and atrocities committed against civilians and combatants are a matter of record²⁴ that would be both insensitive and remiss not to acknowledge in the search for the origin of the orc rhetoric in this armed conflict. Indeed, who if not a monster, a beast or an orc blinded by irrational hate and animated by a dark soul could inflict so much pointless suffering and destruction on innocent human beings? As Danylo Sudyn wrote after the liberation of places like Bucha, Irpin or Borodyanka: “How can one do that to another? The Russian’s simply can’t be human, there is nothing human about them. They have completed their transition into orcs!”²⁵

And yet, beyond the understandable outrage that this war has elicited among decent human beings, according to Ian Li²⁶ there are three main reasons why the “tactical narrative” of the Orc Wars became so popular among Ukrainians in their heroic resistance against foreign aggression. First, a fiction-based narrative such as the orc rhetoric is more accessible for the wider public, including those Ukrainians currently in the frontline who grew up with Peter Jackson’s cinematic adaptation of

21 <https://twitter.com/fotohistoriac/status/1471146862975594498?s=51&t=1fvklXS2t5gZc3Mh-XcoKA> (last visited: 12 January 2024).

22 Francisco Lobo, ‘Chile and a global revolution for dignity,’ <https://www.openglobalrights.org/chile-and-a-global-revolution-for-dignity/> (last visited: 15 January 2024).

23 David Ashford, ‘“Orc Talk”: Soviet Linguistics in Middle-Earth,’ *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 29:1 (2018), pp. 26-40.

24 <https://warcrimes.gov.ua/en> (last visited: 12 January 2024); <https://ukraine.un.org/en/248423-head-un-human-rights-monitoring-mission-ukraine-presents-latest-human-rights-report> (last visited: 12 January 2024); Anne Applebaum and Nataliya Gumenyuk, ‘“They didn’t understand anything, but just spoiled people’s lives”: How Russian invaders unleashed violence on small-town residents,’ <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/02/russia-ukraine-war-potemkin-occupation-murder-torture/672841/> (last visited: 12 January 2024); Janine Di Giovanni, ‘Vladimir Putin’s Inhumane Blueprint to Terrorize Civilians in Chechnya, Syria – And Now Ukraine,’ <http://www.vanityfair.com/news/2023/02/vladimir-putin-chechnya-syria-ukraine> (last visited: 12 January 2024).

25 Danylo Sudyn, ‘Orcs and Men: How Tolkien helps us understand what’s wrong with Russia and its people,’ <https://tyzhden.ua/orcs-and-men-how-tolkien-helps-us-understand-what-s-wrong-with-russia-and-its-people/> (last visited: 12 January 2024).

26 Ian Li, ‘Constructing the Orc: Embracing Fiction in Ukraine’s Tactical Narrative,’ <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/constructing-orc-embracing-fiction-ukraines-tactical-narrative> (last visited: 12 January 2024).

Tolkien's work and may draw inspiration from this kind of epic. This connects to the second reason, namely that this type of narrative has the potential to espouse heroic action by encouraging the individual to display mettle and stoicism in the face of danger. Finally, fiction can be a source of escapism and renewed hope when the chips are down in real life and the chances of success are meager at best when confronting unfavorable odds.

III. The pushback: “Evil mode” activated

The villain's origin story that humanizes an otherwise irredeemably evil character has become a popular trope, as borne out by such compelling examples as “*Jesus Christ Superstar*” (1970) – which focuses on a morally conflicted Judas – or “*Joker*” (2019) – where we witness how a merciless world produces a criminal mastermind. It can also be found in the fictional universe where orcs dwell, J.R.R. Tolkien's “*The Lord of the Rings*.”

Indeed, in 1999 Kirill Yeskov published “*The Last Ringbearer*,”²⁷ in his own words an “apocryphal treatment”²⁸ of “*The Lord of the Rings*.” This fan-fiction of sorts has been characterized by Laura Miller as “Middle-earth according to Mordor” or as “*The Lord of the Rings*” “from the perspective of the bad guys.”²⁹ Its main premise is that history is always written by the victors, an axiom that can be applied to both real world events or to fiction, including Tolkien's work. In that sense, Yeskov argues, “*The Lord of the Rings*” presents the over-simplified, rosy view of the winners of the War of the Ring. And one of the easiest and most effective ways to idealize something or someone is to demonize or vilify its opposite, in this case, the defeated armies of Sauron in “*The Lord of the Rings*.” Enter the dreaded “orc.”

But according to “*The Last Ringbearer*” orcs are nothing like what Tolkien describes in his canonical work. The evil, demonic nature assigned to them by the English professor is nothing but a distortion of the “true” events – as far as that adjective makes sense in a discussion about fiction and meta-fiction like this – an account which Yeskov's proposal attempts to debunk. Indeed, in his own version of Middle Earth, Barad-dûr is not the dark, cruel place Tolkien – and Peter Jackson – had us believe to be, but quite the opposite. In Yeskov's words, Sauron's stronghold is “[t]hat amazing city of alchemists and poets, mechanics and astronomers, philosophers and physicians, the heart of the only civilization in Middle Earth to bet on rational knowledge and bravely pitch its barely adolescent technology against ancient magic.”³⁰ Further, “His

²⁷ Kirill Yeskov, *The Last Ringbearer*, updated English translation by Yisroel Markov (The Tenseg Press, 2011).

²⁸ <https://ymarkov.livejournal.com/273409.html> (last visited: 25 January 2024).

²⁹ Laura Miller, ‘Middle-earth according to Mordor,’ https://www.salon.com/2011/02/15/last_ringbearer/ (last visited: 25 January 2024).

³⁰ Yeskov, op. cit., p. 12.

Majesty Sauron the VIII” is portrayed therein as a constitutional monarch who passes universal literacy laws as his society is on the brink of an industrial revolution powered by steam engines, electricity, and even aeronautic technology.³¹

Conversely, this deconstruction of Middle Earth makes sure to bring the victors down from the pedestals where Tolkien left them, including such beloved characters as Aragorn – in Yeskov’s rendition a Machiavellian politician controlled by a cunning and ambitious Arwen – and Gandalf – reimagined here as a warmonger pushing for the implementation of a “Final Solution to the Mordorian problem.” To such a dark prospect a hesitant and sensible Saruman replies that history will be written by the victors, who will most likely “cast Mordor as the Evil Empire that wished to enslave the entire Middle Earth, and its inhabitants as non-human monsters that rode werewolves and ate human flesh...”³² Only, according to Yeskov, the inhabitants of Mordor are not in actuality evil monsters or “orcs,” but simply humans of perhaps a different race or skin complexion than the ones found to the west of Middle Earth. But a different look, being “short and wide-faced,” coupled with a different political view, is all it takes for Westernese mothers in this fictional world to raise their children in fear of the despicable “orc.”³³

So what? What does it matter that a biologist and paleontologist with a fascination for spiders wrote a fan-fiction based off of Tolkien’s masterpiece? Is not the Internet teeming with such creations, most of which never get to see the light of day anyway? But in the case of Yeskov’s “*The Last Ringbearer*” what started out as a work written for the author’s “own enjoyment and that of [his] friends (...) just ‘another fairy tale for junior scientists’”³⁴ like himself, became widely celebrated in Russian society,³⁵ and it even afforded Yeskov a literary award in that country. As Sudyn remarks: “it seemed as if the Russians deliberately tried to portray themselves as the antagonist orcs from the books of the professor.”³⁶

But why do some Russians embrace the label? According to Luka Karsten Breitig, “Some believe that the Russians recognize themselves in orcs because they are strong and militant and not because they are despised. In their opinion, orcs stand out against the background of the declining West.”³⁷ Accordingly, Luka Ivan Jukic identifies some correlation between the success of Yeskov’s work and Russian view of history and world politics in the 20th century:

31 Ibid, p. 19.

32 Ibid, p. 23.

33 Ibid, p. 6.

34 Ibid, p. 542.

35 Miller, op. cit.

36 Sudyn, op. cit.

37 Luka Karsten Breitig, ‘Ukrainian War Dictionary Or Why Russians Are Called Orcs,’ <https://www.thehappybeavers.com/post/ukrainian-war-dictionary-or-why-russians-are-called-orcs-thb> (last visited: 15 February 2024).

“That Yeskov’s retelling gives us some insight into Putin’s perspective on international relations is incidental rather than intentional. But it is nonetheless an important insight. (...) The Russian attempt to portray the war in Ukraine as a war with the US and Nato — a war defending the memory of the Soviet victory in Second World War — is an attempt, by a Soviet baby boomer, to avenge the defeat of the Cold War.

(...) In a sense, this is Putin’s ultimate goal in Ukraine: to recast the confrontation of East and West as a victory for the East, not the West. For Mordor to persist as its own civilisation, free of elven values. For most Ukrainians, Tolkien’s original provides a preferable framework. It’s not yet clear which history will turn out to be that of the victors.”³⁸

Arguably, one of the reasons why Russians can find historical solace in Yeskov’s account of Tolkien’s fantasy world is its masterful relativization of evil and subversion of truth, as exemplified by a speech delivered by one of the Ringwraiths, Sharya-Rana, whose collected and cogent character is not nearly as spooky as the black-hooded rider from the movies. In Yeskov’s account, the Nine are benign demigods that promote the advancement of reason and of humans to protect them from the obscure magic of the elves, whose ultimate goal is to subjugate humankind in a *Matrix*-like medieval dystopia:

“The forces of magic will reconfigure this world to their liking, and henceforth it will have no room for technological civilizations like that of Mordor. (...) As for Men... Men will forever remain pitiful deficient creatures who will not dare raise their eyes to look at the masters of the world – the Elves; it is only in a changing world that a mortal can turn his curse into a blessing and rise above the Immortals through generational improvement. In two or three decades the Elves will turn Middle Earth into a well-trimmed tidy lawn, and Men into cute pets; they will deprive Man of a very small thing – his right to Create, and grant him a myriad of plain and simple pleasures instead...”³⁹

It is with such rhetorical contortions – coupled with additional plot twists such as the fact that *the* ring of power was a red herring all along as the real magical power lied in a device possessed by the Elves (Galadriel’s mirror)⁴⁰ – that Yeskov’s work echoes the kind of information warfare and obfuscation operations that Russians have mastered over the decades. As McGlynn highlights in a recent study:

38 Luka Ivan Jukic, ‘Why Russia rewrote Lord of the Rings. Tolkien’s fantasy world is being weaponized,’ <https://unherd.com/2022/09/why-russia-rewrote-lord-of-the-rings/> (last visited: 15 February 2024).

39 Yeskov, op. cit., p. 103.

40 Ibid, pp. 114-115.

“[t]he Russian propaganda tactics used against Ukraine correspond to those deployed against many European countries: making people doubt and question their own sense of reality, so they may then become more susceptible to further Russian propaganda, rather than trying to impose an entirely different parallel reality all at once. Russia has always compartmentalized its propaganda, domestically and abroad. For those who cannot be convinced by the Kremlin’s narratives, the secondary aim is to make people believe that there is no truth, or that they cannot know the truth, so that they become more emotions-driven and therefore more susceptible to propaganda.”⁴¹

It is no wonder, then, that Yeskov’s work has been so acclaimed in a country that routinely deals in counter-narratives and mis/disinformation, a place where relativism reigns. By presenting such a revised version of a clear-cut good vs. evil narrative such as “*The Lord of the Rings*,” Yeskov has effectively reclaimed or reappropriated the slur “orc” and, inadvertently, weaponized it for its use by an aggressive regime.

Consequently, by perpetuating the use of a label that Russians do not really have a problem with reclaiming, Ukrainians have become exposed to a number of risks. These risks are mainly three: (i) not taking the enemy seriously; (ii) the escalation of the rhetoric up to the point of reciprocal dehumanization; and (iii) the danger of backfiring by galvanizing the enemy.

The first risk, consisting of not taking the enemy seriously by turning them into a caricature, thus underestimating their capacity for unimaginable evil, has been most notably articulated in the past by Oleksii Danilov, Secretary of the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine. In late 2022, Danilov reportedly remarked:

“We probably shouldn’t get too carried away with using new terms [such as] Orcs, rusnia, svynosobaka [a literal translation of German insult Schweinhund, meaning ‘pig-dog’ – Ed.]...

There is no need to blur the image of the enemy, so to speak.

We write and immediately document for history: ‘ruskii’ (Russian), ‘Russian’, ‘Russia’, killed, attacked, robbed, raped, destroyed, lied.

So that it is forever etched in the Ukrainian historical memory, which nation bears full collective responsibility for the bloody war, and so that we will never forget all the abominations of the Russian ‘brotherhood.’”⁴²

The second risk involves an escalation of the orc rhetoric to such an extent that, as a result of the dehumanization of the enemy, they in turn engage in the same kind of discourse by dehumanizing Ukrainians back. This is what Dave Grossman

⁴¹ McGlynn, ‘Russian Propaganda,’ pp. 26-27.

⁴² Roman Petrenko, ‘National Security and Defence Council Secretary advises not to call Russians “Orcs and Schweinhunds”,’ <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2022/12/25/7382301/> (last visited: 16 February 2024).

characterizes as the “double-edged sword” that allows both oppressors and victims to justify their reciprocal violence.⁴³ More concretely, in the case of the Russo-Ukrainian war McGlynn reports: “Anti-Ukrainian propaganda is virulent in the occupied territories, more so than in Russia itself. Ukrainians are routinely referred to as Nazis, fascists, and terrorists. Ukrainians are depicted as intent on destroying the Russian people, their language, and their religious traditions.”⁴⁴

The third risk has to do with the danger that the orc rhetoric might backfire in the sense that Russians may actually embrace it, thus galvanizing them and strengthening their resolve. This is not unheard of in history. In fact, one of the most famous slurs-turned-source-of-national-identity-and pride is the label “Yankee.” As Lakoff remarks, the term was originally used by British soldiers to mock Americans both before and during the Revolutionary War, supposedly meant to signify that American troops were ragtag and disorganized. “While the British intended it disparagingly, the Americans, in perhaps the first historical instance of reclamation, made the word their own and gave it a positive spin, turning the derisive song ‘Yankee Doodle’ into our first, if unofficial, national anthem.”⁴⁵ What if, inspired by Yeskov’s literary transvaluation, the Russian’s came up with their own “Orc Doodle”?

Such are the risks enclosed in the rhetoric underwriting the “Orc Wars.” However, they are not insurmountable. In fact, the key to addressing these drawbacks may yet lie in Yeskov’s work itself, a possibility to which we turn next.

IV. Of “Orocuens” and “Araucanians”: Decolonizing the orc

The fight of Ukrainians against Russian aggression has been described not only as an archetypal form of the inherent right to self-defense enshrined in the UN Charter, but also as a form of resistance against colonialism. Indeed, a report recently published by the International Centre for Defence and Security indicates that the Russian Federation behaves like an exaggerated version of nineteenth century landed empires as evinced by its expansionist drive and its disregard for the sovereignty of smaller countries.⁴⁶

Ukraine, the “borderland,” can not only be said to be “on the fault line between East and West;”⁴⁷ it has always been at the fault line between empires pushing and expanding from every direction. It is no wonder then that one of its foremost

⁴³ Grossman, op. cit., p. 162.

⁴⁴ McGlynn, ‘Russian Propaganda,’ p. 17.

⁴⁵ Lakoff, op. cit.

⁴⁶ James Sherr and Igor Gretskiy, *Why Russia Went to War. A Three-dimensional Perspective* (Tallinn: ICDS, 2023), p. 3.

⁴⁷ Michael Totten, ‘Ukraine: On the Fault Line Between East and West,’ <https://quilllette.com/2022/03/14/ukraine-on-the-fault-line-between-east-and-west/> (last visited: 21 February 2024).

national foundational narratives, the Cossack rebellion of 1648 – the same year modern international law as a system of sovereign states resulting from the peace of Westphalia was born – is infused by an anti-colonial spirit that survives to this day, when Ukrainians are fending off Putin’s own imperialist push.⁴⁸

Interestingly, though, Yeskov’s reinterpretation of Tolkien’s “*The Lord of the Rings*” is also inspired by an anti-colonial narrative. This is evidenced not only by its portrayal of the fictional West (i.e. Men, Wizards and Elves) as an expansionist force oppressing the peace-loving East. A more subtle indicator of such a philosophy can be found in the name Yeskov chose to reimagine his orcs, namely the people (for they are actual people in his account) who live in the East. Thus, orcs are rebranded as “Orocuens” in “*The Last Ringbearer*,” which according to the Appendix to the English translation corresponds to the “author’s reconstruction of the name that got shortened to ‘Orc’; meant to evoke Araucanian Indians.”⁴⁹

The Araucanians or Mapuche are an indigenous tribe located to the south of Chile and Argentina, on either side of the Andes mountains. As the Spanish Conquistadors advanced relentlessly to the southernmost part of the American continent, their otherwise ineluctable expansion met with the fierce resistance of the people inhabiting the territory of Arauco, the Mapuche, much as the Romans met their match in the Caledonians as they attempted to expand to the north of Great Britain. The struggle that ensued between Spanish and Mapuche would become known as the “Arauco War” (“*Guerra de Arauco*”), and it would last three hundred years from the mid 16th to the late 19th centuries. The repercussions of this violent clash of civilizations can be felt even today in the form of continuous land disputes and civil unrest in Chile’s “*Macrozona Sur*.”⁵⁰

Now, it is important to point out here that the Spanish Conquistadors saw themselves as heirs to the Roman imperial tradition.⁵¹ Accordingly, not only they waged war tirelessly; they consistently wrote about it as a way of commemorating their historic deeds. One such literary work written by an admirer of Virgil is the epic poem “*La Araucana*” by the Spanish poet and soldier Alonso de Ercilla y Zúñiga, or simply Ercilla, and published in three parts between 1569, 1578, and 1590. In Ercilla’s own words, he decided to write “a true story on matters of war, to which so many are

48 Timothy Snyder, ‘The War in Ukraine is a Colonial War,’ <https://www.newyorker.com/news/essay/the-war-in-ukraine-is-a-colonial-war> (last visited: 21 February 2024).

49 Yeskov, op. cit., p. 527. As a citizen of Chile, the country where the Araucanian Indians, or the Mapuche people, originally come from, I felt compelled to further inquire about this peculiar stylistic choice. Over a private email exchange Yeskov confirmed that he was looking for a name that was consonant with “orcs” for his own positive Mordorians. The Araucanians, with their heroic centuries-old resistance against the Spanish conquest, seemed to him to be the relevant name (correspondence between Yeskov and the author over email on 29 December 2023).

50 Ben Emmerson, ‘Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism,’ <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/769432?ln=en> (last visited: 21 February 2024).

51 David Lupher, *Romans in a New World. Classical Models in Sixteenth-Century Spanish America* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2009).

attracted,⁵² written in the midst of combat, reportedly even scribbling on leather or parchment when paper was nowhere to be found.⁵³

What Ercilla basically narrates in “*La Araucana*” is the first decades of the Arauco War that pitted the Spanish, battle-hardened after years of religious wars in Europe and imperial expansion in the Indies, against the Araucanians, the recalcitrant and warlike free folk whom the mighty Inca empire was never able to subdue, thereby Arauco being also known as the “untamed state” (“*Estado indómito*”),⁵⁴ a land the Spanish empire was never able to completely conquer.

But Ercilla makes a point of not only giving a voice to his own team. He takes care to give the Mapuche as much airtime as Europeans in “*La Araucana*”: “if it seems to anyone that I seem inclined towards the side of the Araucanians, treating their things and braveries more extensively than what is warranted for barbarians (...) there are few who with so much tenacity and steadfastness have defended their land against such fierce enemies as are the Spanish.”⁵⁵

Thereby, by endowing the Araucanians with agency and a voice, as well as by praising their bravery and skill in the art of war – even comparing their heroic resistance with the epic Battle of Lepanto⁵⁶ – Ercilla manages to achieve his ultimate goal of magnifying the Spanish victory for having defeated such a formidable foe, as “the victor is no more esteemed than that in which the vanquished is reputed.”⁵⁷

Even though the Mapuche remain the enemy and the other, epitomized by the label “barbarian” used throughout to refer to them in “*La Araucana*,” Ercilla highlights a few episodes of humane treatment and even chivalry in the midst of war, for example, the Spaniards’ decision to feed the besieged enemy so they can defeat them by the sword fair and square.⁵⁸ This chivalric content would even afford an epic poem like “*La Araucana*” a place in the personal library of Cervantes’ Don Quixote.⁵⁹

It is due to this ability to acknowledge the enemy’s agency and courage that “*La Araucana*” has been characterized as a work that somehow humanizes the nigh

52 Free translation from Spanish: “historia verdadera y de cosas de guerra, a las cuales hay tantos aficionados.” See Alonso de Ercilla y Zúñiga, *La Araucana* (Santiago: Penguin, 2018), Prologue.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid, Notes.

55 Free translation from Spanish: “si a alguno le pareciere que me muestro algo inclinado a la parte de los auraucanos, tratando sus cosas y valentías más estendidamente de lo que para bárbaros se requiere (...) son pocos los que con tan gran constancia y firmeza han defendido su tierra contra tan fieros enemigos como son los españoles.” Ibid.

56 Ibid, Prologue to Part II.

57 Free translation from Spanish: “no es el vencedor más estimado de aquello en que el vencido es reputado.” Ibid, Part I, Song I.

58 Ibid, Song XII.

59 Sergio Macías, ‘De cómo el Ingenioso Hidalgo Don Quijote de La Mancha llegó a Chile. Introducción,’ https://cvc.cervantes.es/literatura/quijote_america/chile/macias.htm (last visited: 21 February 2024).

irredeemably brutal conquest of the New World.⁶⁰ Accordingly, Ercilla’s commitment to the relentless European imperial expansion has been significantly qualified by some critics.⁶¹ Furthermore, one of the foremost Chilean poets of the 20th century, Pablo Neruda, saw Ercilla as the “inventor of Chile,” his “*La Araucana*” amounting to a true “path” (“*camino*”) towards the reassessment of the brutality of European imperialism as well as a reappraisal of Ercilla’s ability to see true heroism wherever it came from, either “us” or “them,” his heart arguably belonging more to “them,” to the indomitable.⁶²

Thus, by producing an account of a traumatic experience such as a war of conquest that gives all sides a voice and agency, celebrating their strength and determination as well as acknowledging their frailty and humanity in an evenhanded way, Ercilla delineated the “path” toward the construction of the Chilean national identity, one forged in bloodshed and suffering as much as in honor and dignity. If this was possible in a place where colonialism was brutal, where its consequences can be felt even today, can it be done in a similar scenario of imperialist expansion and national liberation struggle? Is there a place where we may find a similar path toward the humanization of the Orocuen in Ukrainian history?

V. Kotlyarevsky’s “*Eneida*” and the quest for a Ukrainian “*Araucana*”

In his characterization of the war in Ukraine as a fight against colonialism, Timothy Snyder remarks: “Yet Ukrainian history gives us something more interesting than a mere counter-narrative to empire. We can find Ukrainian national feeling at a very early date.”⁶³ That Ukrainian early national feeling manifested itself in the form of the Cossack rebellion against Poland in 1648.⁶⁴ Referring to those foundational years, Roslyav Semkiv writes:

“The Cossacks were the insubordinate settlers of the southeastern border of modern Ukraine, who lived from hunting or farming and defended their homes and the (...) southeastern borders from invaders who wanted to plunder them. We see that nothing has changed in 500 years — the invaders are here, again. And so are the Cossacks.

(...)

nowadays the image of a Cossack is that of a warrior who defends his native land without fear or doubt and, which is common, wins. A victorious

60 Eva Valero Juan, ‘Trayectorias poéticas de la memoria colectiva chilena,’ *Romance Notes* 59:3 (2019), p. 582.

61 Eva Valero Juan, ‘Reconstruyendo el camino de Ercilla... Bello, Mistral y Neruda,’ *América sin Nombre* (2010), p. 202.

62 Pablo Neruda, ‘Nosotros, los indios,’ in *Para nacer he nacido* (Austral Editorial, 2010), p. 168.

63 Snyder, ‘Colonial War’.

64 Ibid. On the Cossacks more generally, see Serhii Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe. A History of Ukraine* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), pp. 115 et seq; on the Great Revolt of 1648, see *ibid.*, pp. 146 et seq.

Cossack can get out of a hundred troubles; he is the one who is capable of going against the enemy's guns in his salwar and with a saber, who, when offered to surrender, writes a mocking letter to the Ottoman Sultan and tells a missile cruiser to f@ck off. This is how we see him. This is how Ivan Kotlyarevsky created him."⁶⁵

Ivan Kotlyarevsky was born in Poltava in 1769. A teacher turned military officer during the times of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, as well as in a period of continuous Russian and Turkish imperial clashes over the much-coveted borderland in between (i.e. Ukraine), Kotlyarevsky took it upon himself to write a literary work to celebrate the Cossack identity after the abolition of the Hetman State in 1764 and the destruction of the Zaporizhian Sich in 1775. Thus, in 1798 he published the first edition of his masterpiece "*Eneida*," a parody of Virgil's "*Aeneid*," also called sometimes a "travesty"⁶⁶ or a "burlesque"⁶⁷ version of the Roman epic poem. As it is well known, Virgil's "*Aeneid*" tells the story of the last survivors of Troy who flee the besieged city and wander across the Mediterranean until they finally get to Italy where they eventually become the founders of Rome. In Kotlyarevsky's reimagined version of the poem, Aeneas and his proto-Roman Trojans are portrayed as Cossacks looking to build a new community after the destruction of their ancestral land.

The cultural importance of "*Eneida*" can be hardly overstated. A mandatory reading for every schoolgirl and schoolboy in Ukraine – much like "*La Araucana*" is an obligatory text in the Chilean educational curriculum – it is said to represent the cornerstone for the rebirth of Ukrainian literature,⁶⁸ in such a way that "*Aeneid*, just like *Kobzar*, became the leading symbols of the forbidden Ukrainian culture for a long time and, thanks to their fame, survived the decline and collapse of the Russian Empire."⁶⁹

Thus, Kotlyarevsky used parody as a vehicle for self-reflection and a source of national identity, not unlike Leonard Bernstein's "*West Side Story*," an adaptation of another European classic (Shakespeare's "*Romeo and Juliet*") that helped shape America's own identity as a "melting pot" of different cultures in tension.⁷⁰ Both classics, "*Eneida*" and "*West Side Story*," stand as symbols of the liminal spaces where Europe ends/begins⁷¹ (Ukraine) and continues (America).

65 Rostylav Semkiv, 'Ivan Kotlyarevsky. The creator of the central image of Ukrainian culture,' <https://chytomo.com/en/ivan-kotlyarevsky-the-creator-of-the-central-image-of-ukrainian-culture/> (last visited: 22 February 2024).

66 Bohdan Lepky, 'Foreword from Bohdan Lepky's Berlin edition in 1922,' in Ivan Kotlyarevsky, *Aeneid*, Bohdan Melnyk trans. (Toronto: The Basilian Press, 2004), p. 10.

67 Semkiv, op. cit.

68 Lepky, op. cit., p. 10.

69 Semkiv, op. cit.

70 Christian Thrailkill, "'West Side Story' and the American Melting Pot," <https://www.thebulwark.com/west-side-story-and-the-american-melting-pot/> (last visited: 22 February 2024).

71 Plokhy, *Gates*.

Interestingly, Laura Miller believes that Yeskov’s “*The Last Ringbearer*,” with its sardonic twists on familiar characters and events from Tolkien’s world, also qualifies as a parody.⁷² Arguably, as it is celebrated in Russia as a form of counter-narrative to resist the West (both the one from Middle Earth and the one from planet Earth) and its Manichean narrative of good versus evil, Yeskov’s parody can also be construed as a source of national identity.

But parodies like “*Eneida*” and “*The Last Ringbearer*” can serve a third purpose, in addition to their immediate comedic role and their instrumentalization for the construction of identity: “Like caricatures with their exaggerated features, parodies reveal an underlying reality which the purported comedic effect brings to the forefront.”⁷³ In this sense, parodies can remind us of what we have lost, which makes us smile precisely because it becomes so inconceivable to have it back under new circumstances. A great example of this are Cervantes’ “*Don Quixote*” and Monty Python’s Black Knight from “*Monty Python and the Holy Grail*,” two absurd depictions of the medieval knight that remind us of what we have lost in a post-romantic world where there is no place for chivalry and honor unless it is in the form of mockery.⁷⁴

What about “*Eneida*”? What does this parody remind us of that we have lost? And how can we use it to help us in the task of re-humanizing the enemy? Meant as a constructive narrative of self-determination, “*Eneida*” at the same time deconstructs something that is no longer there, or if it is, it is only in a diminished version of its former self: imperial grandeur. Hence, Aeneas’ and his Cossack’s attempt to speak broken Latin⁷⁵ stands as a metaphor of the futility of the erstwhile *lingua franca* of the Roman world, while at the same time being an indictment of the arrogance of any imperial experiment when it does not pay heed to the desires, interests and experiences of the locals.

Further, when it comes to the quaint ideas of chivalry and honor in battle, “*Eneida*” does not mince words to contrast it with the harsh realities of the Cossack way of war:

“That is how it was long time ago
In our Hetman State.
(...)
Although not pretty in particular,
Impulsive and irregular,
They were so good in war:
Kidnapping, getting information,

⁷² Miller, op. cit.

⁷³ Francisco Lobo, ‘Parody or deadly serious commitment? Non-state armed groups upholding humanitarian standards in war,’ <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/parody-or-deadly-serious-commitment-non-state-armed-groups-upholding-humanitarian-standards-in-war> (last visited: 22 February 2024).

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Kotlyarevsky, op. cit., Part IV, pp. 127-130.

No guns could stop their spoliation,
In stealing, they had no competitor.”⁷⁶

Similarly, Ercilla’s “*La Araucana*” also reminds us that even among honorable adversaries combat can get nasty: “to the near enemy he clung, biting him and blinding him with mud, seeking to win by any means.”⁷⁷ Such means may admittedly include, Kotlyarevsky further writes, “To gnaw, to choke, to bite,”⁷⁸ as the Cossack’s enemy is but an “ugly Latin scarecrow” who has no rights.⁷⁹ In light of this, how can there be anything worth salvaging in “*Eneida*” that might assist Ukrainians in the Augean task of re-humanizing the orc?

When a work such as “*Eneida*” parodies the Roman empire’s origin story, it makes it possible to discern everything that has been lost, not just the bad (namely Rome’s hubris and splendor), but also the good. And one of the foremost legacies of Rome, according to Hannah Arendt, is the presence of mind to forgive the vanquished instead of annihilating them. Thus, the political genius of Rome resides in this capacity to form and maintain alliances with former foes by sparing the vanquished (“*parcere subjectis*”) through the effective use of legislation and foundation, “a wisdom entirely unknown to the Greeks.”⁸⁰

This signature Roman spirit of integration carried on by the Spanish Conquistadores⁸¹ is arguably what makes Ercilla’s “*La Araucana*” a true path for building a mixed national identity, as Neruda once argued. In the case of Kotlyarevsky’s “*Eneida*,” (and of the original “*Aeneid*”) even though the antagonist, Turn, is ultimately executed without mercy by Aeneas, this final act of violence serves as sacrificial offer of sorts that eventually allows the Trojans (the Cossacks) to integrate the defeated Latin people into their commonwealth and grow to become one of the greatest nations in history.

In light of this legacy, the choice lies yet before Ukrainians as to what to do with a recalcitrant enemy such as the Russian orc. As Snyder astutely points out, the counter-imperial narrative is not the only approach available to this brave nation engaged in

76 Ibid, Part IV, p. 149.

77 Free translation from Spanish: “al vecino enemigo se aferraba mordiéndole y cegándole con lodo, buscando de vencer cualquier modo.” See Ercilla, op. cit., Part II, Song XII.

78 Kotlyarevsky, op. cit., Part V, p. 205.

79 Ibid, Part VI, p. 238.

80 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 195; 239. See also Hannah Arendt, *¿Qué es política?* (Barcelona: Paidós, 1997), p. 119.

81 Some scholars like Elvira Roca have postulated a conceptual difference between “imperialism” and “colonialism,” whereby the former means territorial expansion accompanied by cultural intermingling and miscegenation in an effort to replicate the original Urbis (including its legal system) across the world; whereas the latter only involves territorial expansion for economic gain, strictly preserving the difference between the metropolis and the colonies. According to Roca, Rome, Spain, and the United States (at least when it comes to territorial expansion in the American landmass) are examples of this concept of “empire,” unlike France or England, which only ever exercised “colonialism”. See María Elvira Roca, *Imperiofobia y leyenda negra. Roma, Rusia, Estados Unidos y el Imperio español*, 27th ed. (Madrid: Siruela, 2020), p. 426.

an existential struggle: “In contemporary Ukraine, though, the nation is not so much anti-colonial, a rejection of a particular imperial power, as post-colonial, the creation of something new.”⁸²

One important example of the possibility to create that something new in human history came in the form of the rules-based international order, a relatively young and admittedly fragile construct established only seven decades ago, after the debacle of two world wars. Infused with the Roman genius of forgiveness and alliance – as evidenced by the prosperity reached by both Germany and Japan as a result of this reconfiguration – this is the same rules-based international order that Ukraine and its allies are fighting and dying for.⁸³

And, as Ukraine’s own law implementing International Humanitarian Law bears out,⁸⁴ it is an integral component of said order that even enemies have rights and are to be treated humanely in accordance with their human dignity, no matter how monstrous or culpable, be they the Görings and the Eichmanns of the world, the monsters, the terrorists,⁸⁵ and even the orcs.

VI. Concluding remarks

Equipped with a deep knowledge of Ukrainian history and a profound respect for the Ukrainian culture, Timothy Snyder warns the world of the dangers of continuing an imperial rhetoric by believing they know better than the Ukrainians about how best to fight their own war for survival.⁸⁶ With an infinitesimal fraction of his knowledge, yet the same amount of respect, my aim in this brief reflection has been, not to tell Ukrainians how to fight their own war, but to share with them a perspective from one post-colonial people to another.

Thereby, I truly believe the Ukrainian “Araucana” can be envisaged and lived out every day by the brave defenders of this great nation, understood as their own path toward the construction of an identity that can live up to its full potential not only as a parody of Rome, but as a continuator of its great normative legacy as one of the oldest sources of the rules-based international order so cherished by Ukrainian and Western allies alike. Especially as some lament the “twilight” of the rules-based

82 Snyder, ‘Colonial War.’

83 Francisco Lobo, ‘Defending the Rules-Based Order: The US at a Crossroads,’ <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/defending-rules-based-order-us-crossroads> (last visited: 22 February 2024).

84 <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/z0704-17#Text> (last visited: 22 February 2024).

85 Dublin Core, ‘Terrorists are people too,’ <https://memory.richmond.edu/items/show/1663> (last visited: 22 February 2024).

86 Snyder, ‘Colonial War.’

order;⁸⁷ Ukraine can step forward as a champion for the defense of this common ideal, mindful of the fact that just wars not only have to be fought and won; they also have to be fought well.⁸⁸

Fighting well entails acknowledging the enemy as human, no matter how outrageous and brutal their behavior, as they are endowed with reason and a capacity to discern good from evil, or in one word, agency. This agency becomes a fundamental premise, not only of criminal liability and moral responsibility, but also for not losing our own humanity while fighting the darkest forces nesting within the human heart.

In that sense, we would be well advised to pay heed to Danylo Sudyn's call for the humanization of the orc:

“Yet again, it is necessary to return to Tolkien and his orcs. He continued to see the humane side of the orcs. We must do the same with Russians. Tolkien was interested in seeing the humanity in orcs, but we must investigate the opposite – where did the humanity of the Russians disappear? In other words, what happened to a group of homo sapiens who seemed to have lost empathy and their social capabilities?”⁸⁹

Thus, Tolkien's wisdom may illuminate the path forward in our effort to understand the wickedness of men and orcs alike – for Yeskov's Orocuens are as human as the real-life Russians occupying today a land that does not belong to them. In a poignant passage where he describes how a little Hobbit tries to make sense of human violence, Tolkien leaves untouched the hope that, under different circumstances, the aggressor may have preferred to never commit the sin of war:

“It was Sam's first view of a battle of Men against Men, and he did not like it much. He was glad he could not see the dead face. He wondered what the man's name was and where he came from; and if he was really evil of heart, or what lies and threats had led him on the long march from his home; and if he would not really rather have stayed there in peace.”⁹⁰

87 Ishaan Tharoor, 'In Ukraine and Gaza, twilight for the "rules-based order",' (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/02/23/gaza-ukraine-israel-russiarules-based-order/>) (last visited: 23 February 2024).

88 Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, 5th ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2015), p. 127.

89 Sudyn, op. cit.

90 J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (London: Harper Collins, 2008), p. 864.

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