

# A Few Reflections on the Demonisation of Putin

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Giotto's depiction of the devil (Padua, Scrovegni Chapel, ca. 1305)

Henry Kissinger [once declared](#) that “Putin’s demonisation is not a policy, but an *alibi* for the absence of one”. However authoritative the source of this recommendation, the collective fixation with the Russian President has reached new heights during the ongoing geopolitical crisis in the Ukraine. In many different ways, the idea that, if the President of the Russian Federation could meet a however premature end of his earthly journey, even by violent means, this would solve the Ukrainian crisis and the problem of Russia’s resurgence, is gaining momentum among Western elites.

The most explicit articulation of such thoughts can be found [in a piece written by Herbert E. Meyer](#), Special Assistant to the Director of Central Intelligence and Vice Chairman of the CIA’s National Intelligence Council during the Reagan Administration. Meyer puts forward the view that “Russian

President Vladimir Putin is a serious threat to world peace”, he is in essence a thug, and “thugs like Putin don’t stop because they’ve been punished [*the reference here is to the EU sanctions*] or because they see the error of their ways. Thugs have a high tolerance for pain, and they are incapable of changing their behavior. They keep going until someone takes them out – permanently – with a knockout punch”. Without Putin, Moscow would cease to be a threat to world peace, as Russia is a “one-man show”. The Russians should get rid of Putin in one way or the other, either peacefully or, “if Putin is too stubborn to acknowledge that his career is over, and the only way to get him out of the Kremlin is feet-first, with a bullet hole in the back of his head – that would also be okay with us”.

Meyer’s piece comes as the refinement, explicitation, and final outburst of a cluster of recurring motives which have overwhelmed Western media in the last few years. Putin as the murderer of journalist Anna Politkovskaya and of London-based ex-FSB officer Alexander Litvinenko, Putin the persecutors of the *Pussy Riot* punk rock group, Putin the “homophobe”, Putin who “lives in another world” according (allegedly) to German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Putin who is clearly “one the wrong side of history” (US President Barack Obama). Putin the mentally ill. Putin as the new Hitler.

The Hitler analogy deserves more attention. On the one hand its use is becoming ubiquitous. In his day, George W. Bush was Hitler. Saddam Hussein was Hitler. For the anti-austerity protesters, Merkel is Hitler. The *reductio ad Hitlerum* is a currency undergoing hyperinflation.

On the other hand, the Hitler analogy has replaced more sophisticated eschatological images which were fashionable in the European past, namely the figure of the Antichrist as the symbol of *absolute evil* and his coming as the sign of the impending end of the world and Last Judgment. Many European leaders have been labelled as the emissary of the devil: certainly Napoleon Bonaparte, but also Friedrich II of Prussia, and Peter the Great.

The identification of Putin as a manifestation of a metaphysical absolute evil, justifying the recourse to extreme measures, instead of being simply hinted through metaphors, and reduced to a trivial matter for low-level propagandistic efforts, should be become the centre of a more nuanced discussion, and in the context of European culture there is plenty of ways to approach the question of his possible removal.

Murder is considered a punishable act in most legal and moral systems. However, not all forms of physical elimination of other human beings is illegitimate and therefore classified as murder, as clearly in the case of self-defence, or while engaging legitimate targets on the battlefield. The intellectual problem of political leaders' targeting is not at all new. It is possible to distinguish two general cases. One concerns the elimination of political and military leaders in war. The second one deals instead with the domestic ordering of a given polity.

From a strategic perspective, what has been termed the “decapitation strike” consists precisely in the targeting of centres of command and control, both military and political, in order to plunge the enemy into organisational chaos. This position has supporters and detractors, although the idea invariably refers to scenarios where open hostilities are at least either imminent or incipient, and certainly not as a practice, nor as a recipe, for inter-state peace. Clearly, such operation will automatically legitimise symmetrical acts of retaliation, opening scenarios of spiralling, indiscriminate violence with unpredictable consequences.

As readers familiar with the history of international political theory know, there has been an astonishing variety of views on the rightful conduct of war in Western thought (reflections on the so-called *iustum bellum*). Traditionally, wars among Christian nations were supposed to be highly regulated, while several degrees of unrestricted warfare were usually allowed against infidels.

In the biblical *Book of Judith*, the homonymous Jewish heroine saves her people during the siege of Bethulia by penetrating in the camp of the besiegers, seducing Holofernes, the general of the enemy army, and beheading him during his drunken sleep. As in this illustrious precedent, the assassination of the enemy's leader appears to be an act of despair usually associated with all-out genocidal wars.

As a modern conception of international and global politics was arising, distancing itself from a Christian/non-Christian dichotomy, Immanuel Kant warned again this kind of practices in the sixth provisional article for perpetual peace of his *Zum ewigen Frieden* (1795). Kant calls for a ban in warfare of all those practices which will make reciprocal trust in future peace agreements impossible, such as assassination, poisoning, breach of capitulation, instigation to treason. Interestingly, the philosopher characterises such actions as “dishonourable stratagems” (*ehrlöse Stratagemen*) and explains why this is the case, in two short paragraphs which, considering the current international situation, deserve to be quoted in full:



Judith beheads Holofernes, by Giorgio Vasari (Saint Louis Art Museum)

*These are dishonourable stratagems. For some kind of confidence in the disposition of the enemy must exist even in the midst of war, as otherwise peace could not be concluded, and the hostilities would pass into a war of extermination (bellum internecinum). War, however, is only our wretched expedient of asserting a right by force, an expedient adopted in the state of nature, where no court of justice exists which could settle the matter in dispute. In circumstances like these, neither of the two parties can be called an unjust enemy, because this form of speech presupposes a legal decision: the issue of the conflict just as in the case of the so-called judgments of God decides on which side*

right is. Between states, however, no punitive war (*bellum punitivum*) is thinkable, because between them a relation of superior and inferior does not exist.

**Whence it follows that a war of extermination, where the process of annihilation would strike both parties at once and all right as well, would bring about perpetual peace only in the great graveyard of the human race. Such a war then, and therefore also the use of all means which lead to it, must be absolutely forbidden. That the methods just mentioned do inevitably lead to this result is obvious from the fact that these infernal arts, already vile in themselves, on coming into use, are not long confined to the sphere of war. Take, for example, the use of spies (*uti exploratoribus*). Here only the dishonesty of others is made use of; but vices such as these, when once encouraged, cannot in the nature of things be stamped out and would be carried over into the state of peace, where their presence would be utterly destructive to the purpose of that state.**

**(*Perpetual Peace, A Philosophical Essay*, Translation by Mary Campbell Smith, London: 1917, pages 114-115.)**

Arguing against the demonisation of the enemy, left alone his cold-blooded assassination, does not mean advocating the abolition of all hate and/or conflict. On the contrary, as an old and unfortunately still little appreciated argument goes, precisely the all-too familiar unrestricted war on any form of struggle contradicts itself by thus promoting yet another form of total war. The point is instead that of recognising the place of conflict in this world, and make it productive, particularly by reducing its destructive potential to the minimum, including – if possible – its sublimation towards symbolic forms. The argument here is to restrict and restrain conflict, by conferring upon it a legitimization within clearly demarcated boundaries (the Schmittian *Hegung*). There may be enmity between NATO and Russia, but there is no reason for it to turn into an unrestricted, total war. Within this framework, the denigration of the enemy diminishes the dignity of those who articulate it, and the value of the sacrifices faced during the struggle. Instead of engineering depictions of the enemy which constantly hint at his ontological sub-ordination, the point is not to descend into this form of demonisation, also in order to keep political compromise and diplomatic dialogue always a viable option.

Again, arguing against the demonisation of the enemy does not imply advocating the elimination of all hate. Hate is a human passion among many, and those are constitutive to the human person. This does not mean that the so called “human nature” is fixed, nor it constitutes the endorsement of some sort of “pessimistic” philosophical anthropology. The scope of the present, and admittedly limited reflection, is to warn against the dangers of another form of unrestricted hostility. Even the Gospel’s commandment to “love your enemy” (Matthew 5,44:  $\square\gamma\alpha\pi\sigma\tau\epsilon\ \tau\omicron\sigma\epsilon\ \square\chi\theta\rho\omicron\sigma\ \square\mu\upsilon\upsilon$ ) is circumscribed to the  $\square\chi\theta\rho\omicron\sigma$ , i.e. the adversary in private matters (the Latin *inimicus*), not extended to the  $\rho\omicron\lambda\acute{\epsilon}\mu\omicron\sigma$ , the Latin *hostes* or political foe. Hating one’s political enemy appears to be legitimate, but it is not good advice to excessively indulge in it, as to fall prey to one’s own passions rarely leads to constructive outcomes.

While Putin certainly constitutes a formidable adversary for the elites currently ruling the Western world, precisely for this reason they should appreciate the historical opportunity to demonstrate their valour. Humility (*Bescheidenheit*), one of the required virtues of political leaders, must encompass a positive disposition towards learning from anyone, including and perhaps especially from one’s own enemy. Men and women who have been called upon to rule nations and lead armies should also feel a sense of common destiny (fellowship) beyond the however contingent

political divisions.



The death of Julius Caesar by Vincenzo Camuccini (1771-1844), Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna (Rome)

A second line of thought refers to the intellectual tradition which allows or even recommends as a duty the assassination of political leader whenever these turn to tyrannical rule. It is therefore an issue of domestic politics. There are numerous historical examples of *tyrannicide*, which have generated controversial evaluations and debates, some of them lasting since antiquity, as in the case of Peisistratus of Athens, or Julius Caesar. However, tyrannicide raises at least two questions. The first one concerns the definition itself of tyranny, the second its relation to international politics.

Tyranny should be kept distinguished from other political forms, which are often and incorrectly confused. Tyranny, dictatorship, autocracy,

authoritarianism, despotism, absolutism, are all different, despite the existence of overlapping areas. The concept of tyranny does not simply refer to the case in which an individual or group has concentrated in his hands all or most of political power in a given polity. It refers specifically to a degenerated autocratic form where power is exercised against the principle of the common good, outside and/or against established constitutional rules, and with systematic cruelty against his own subjects for the purpose of maintaining power.

It is questionable to what extent Putin can be classified under the label of a tyrant. There is little doubt that the Russian president is the most powerful individual in the Russian Federation. This is partially due to the design itself of Russia's constitution and its political traditions, with particular reference to the Eusebian conceptions of political order and its further elaboration following Constantine Porphyrogenitus, partially to the political state of exception within which Putin rose to power in the chaotic 1990s. Putin's Russia is certainly an authoritarian state whose ruling elite, a somehow heterogeneous alliance of intelligence and military officers, religious leaders, economic tycoons, and regional strongmen, is sufficiently cohesive to hold an effective control of the country, but not broad enough to enhance a more sophisticated pluralistic outlook.

However, nobody is currently arguing that Putin is exercising his power outside the constitutional framework of the Russian state, and even less by keeping the entire population hostage through sadistic and ubiquitous violence. If anything, Putin enjoys an authentic popular support, even discounting the Kremlin's tight control of the main media. Besides, it is arguable that Putin represents a moderate figure in the landscape of Russian politics, and his ousting would probably open the way to significantly more radical politicians.

Observing the question of tyrannicide from the perspective of international politics, the decision, together with moral and political responsibility of such an extreme act cannot but rest with those who are subjected to a tyrannical power, not to outsiders. As noticed above, excluding the regrettable case of total war, there is no ground for considering such act as a recommendable foreign policy. More in general, the governing principle of international politics may not be so much identified in a somewhat utopian non-intervention rule, but in the conviction that it is the task of those who constitute a certain political community to envisage its political and constitutional ordering, reflecting historical and *lato sensu* anthropological specificities, *despite* foreign meddling.

The often praised "celebration of diversity", if it has to be taken seriously, cannot simply conceive culture as some sort of folklore, but it has to implicitly accept and endorse a pluralism of political forms, as cultures are often based not only on different, but rather on opposite fundamental principles. Such kind of pluralism entails necessarily some

kind of *agonism* and *territorialisation*. As explained above, this agonism is to be legitimised within specific confinements, particularly with regard to the omnipresent danger of maximalism and the descent into total war.

In conclusion, coming back to the temptation of forcing Putin's ousting, there are numerous reasons to reject this stream of thoughts as severely counterproductive. The demonisation of Putin is not a sound policy, not a morally honourable practice. With regard to the coming of the Antichrist and the end of the world, nobody knows its hour (Matthew 24,36: Περὶ δὲ τῆς ἡμέρας καὶ ἡρᾶς οὐδεὶς οἶδεν, οὐδὲ οἱ ἄγγελοι τῶν οὐρανῶν οὐδὲ υἱός, ἐμὲ πατρὸς μόνος). In the words of Jorge of Burgos, the blind monk in Umberto Eco's novel *The Name of the Rose* (1980): "The Antichrist comes in everyone and for everyone, and everyone is part of him".

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Euro Crisis in the Press blog, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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