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Ukraine, Russian fascism and Houdini geography: a conversation with Vitali Vitaliev

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ABSTRACT

Responding to the war in Ukraine, unleashed by the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and ongoing at the time of writing, this article carries the edited transcript of a conversation with Vitali Vitaliev, an independent journalist, author, travel-writer and ‘geographer’. Ukrainian-born with Russian as his first language, and now living and working in the UK, Vitaliev is being deeply affected – intellectually and emotionally, professionally and personally – by the horrors of the current situation. Over the course of the interview transcribed here, he covers aspects of his biography, in Ukraine and elsewhere, as well as reflecting on the geographical sensibility that shapes his writing and then elaborating, in various ways, his interpretation of what is unfolding presently in Ukraine. Fiercely critical of the forms of ‘Russian fascism’ underlying the assault on Ukraine ordered by Russian President Vladimir Putin, Vitaliev discusses the psychological, historical and geopolitical roots of Putin’s actions. He also describes the cementing of a newly confident and dignified Ukrainian identity as a ‘counterforce’ to Putin’s ‘force’, hastening a trajectory whereby most Ukrainians, in both western and eastern Ukraine, are now attempting to escape the hauntings of the Soviet era.

ARTICLE HISTORY



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Introduction

In the spirit of ensuring that the *Scottish Geographical Journal* (SGJ) can be a site for geographically-informed reflection on current world events, processes and problems, an opportunity arose to conduct an interview with Vitali Vitaliev (see [Figure 1](#)), someone deeply knowledgeable about – and individually affected by – the recent history of Ukraine and its troubled relationships with Russia. Born in 1954 in Kharhiv, a predominantly Russian-speaking city in eastern Ukraine not far from the border with Russia, Vitaliev has grown up with a complex self-identity and set of cultural reference-points, Ukrainian and Russian. For some years in the 1980s he was that rare animal, an investigative journalist based in Moscow. In his capacity as a Special Correspondent of the

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Figure 1 . Vitali Vitaliev. (Source: Vitali Vitaliev)

satirical magazine *Krokodil*,¹ he exposed the dismal conjunctures between organised crime, state corruption, the arrest of political prisoners and the activities of Soviet ‘neo-Nazis’. The fearsome KGB (state security police) persuaded Vitaliev that he should ‘defect’ in 1990, whereupon he relocated to the UK, with spells in Australia, continuing as a journalist (particularly a columnist) and starting to author a mixture of fiction, non-fiction and, notably, travel-writing. Reflecting his own earlier interests in geography both real and imagined, discussed in the transcript below, he became a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) in 2018. For some years his writing addressed themes to do with the Soviet Union and the Post-Soviet states, but, wishing to avoid being ‘pigeonholed’, he launched out into projects that combined travel-writing with insights into the making of marginal places, curious places, off-the-beaten-track places, or ones anomalous in terms of their fit – or non-fit – with host (geo)-political jurisdictions (esp. Vitaliev, 2008, 2022a).

All these ingredients swim together in a manner that makes Vitaliev a perfect source for attempting to make sense of the current situation in Ukraine. At the time of writing, Ukraine, a sizeable independent country in eastern Europe, is being thuggishly invaded by Russian military land forces supported by air strikes and the constant shelling of Ukrainian settlements, chiefly but not exclusively in the eastern regions – historically Russian-speaking regions – to which Russia has most explicitly laid claim. **Figure 2** maps the ‘territorial’ positions, gains and losses of Ukrainian and Russian forces as of mid-May 2022, when Vitaliev was interviewed. It is widely accepted that there have already been multiple atrocities committed by Russian soldiers – rape, torture, looting, vandalism, and more – alongside the ‘normal’ killings of combatants in the field or civilians under the shelling. The hateful geographies of death, defilement, debasement and



Figure 2 . Map of current 'balance' of forces in Ukraine, mid-May 2022. (Source: reproduced with permission from the Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project, <https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/DraftUkraineCoTMay15%2C2022.png>.)

dispossession associated with the invasion await forensic reconstruction, in part because the terrors are sadly in no way over yet. What is also apparent is the remarkable resistance being put up by the Ukrainian army, including many volunteers, and the unstinting lines and spaces of support – often provided by Ukrainian women – for everyone caught up in the conflict (extending to the support shown by many neighbouring countries for several million displaced Ukrainians). In amongst the hatefulness, then, there are also countless small geographies of hope and, as Vitaliev emphasises, 'dignity'.

These are the horizons for the conversation that follows, in which Vitaliev provides an account clearly informed by his familiarity with Ukraine, home for much of his early life,

but also by his efforts to comprehend a country undergoing dramatic changes following the collapse of the Soviet Union. When he visits and revisits Ukraine, he is confronted, and sometimes surprised, by exactly how its peoples and places are transitioning away from the Soviet past, escaping – ‘Houdini’-like, we might say, echoing an observation that Vitaliev makes about his own geographical imagination – the constrictions, physical and mental, of the Soviet machinery. For Vitaliev, the invasion of Ukraine commanded by Russian President Vladimir Putin is, ironically, only serving to accelerate this transition, thickening a sense of shared Ukrainian identity – coupling eastern and western Ukraine, Ukrainian-speakers and Russian-speakers alike – and fostering a common attachment to an overall territory that most, if not all, Ukrainians now wish to defend as their independent ‘national’ space.

A decisive move made by Vitaliev in the conversation is to relate the drive to invade Ukraine to what he terms ‘Russian fascism’.² Linking back to his investigations during the 1980s into Russian ‘neo-Nazis’, Vitaliev detects the malign hand of a distinctive, emergent Russian fascism – coined ‘Rashism’ in a Wikipedia post that he cites,³ recently reworked as ‘Ruscism’ by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky – which is fuelling Putin’s catastrophic geopolitical decision-making. A core body of ideas referenced in the Wikipedia emerges from Aleksandr Dugin, a known advocate of ‘borderless Red fascism’ (or ‘red-brown’ alliance) and someone who has seemingly been close to both the Duma and the Kremlin,⁴ whose book entitled in English *The Foundations of Geopolitics: The Geopolitical Futures of Russia* positions Ukraine as an empty, meaningless vessel possessing territory that, historically and strategically, *should* be Russian (Dunlop, 2004). Over twenty years ago, Alan Ingram compellingly distilled the entangled geopolitical and ‘neo-fascist’ threads of Dugin’s position, as well as noting Dugin’s appeal to the baggy boundaries of the old Russian Empire as reborn in the Soviet Union (Ingram, 2001; also Schmidt, 2005; Smith, 1999).⁵ Moreover, Ingram traced Dugin’s debt to British geographer Halford Mackinder’s infamous concept of the ‘Heartland’, indexing the central regions of the Eurasian land mass from which ‘world domination’ arguably derives (Ingram, 2001; also Bassin & Aksenov, 2006).⁶ For Dugin, Ukraine as a sovereign state destabilises Eurasia or indeed Russia, since the latter is *the* ‘natural’ occupier of and beneficiary from the Heartland, and hence ‘Ukraine is therefore to undergo ‘decomposition’, with the west becoming part of central Europe, Crimea joining Kiev [Kyiv] in ‘Little Russia’,⁷ and eastern Ukraine joining Russia’ (Ingram, 2001, pp. 1042–1043).⁸ The phrase ‘decomposition’ acquires chilling overtones from the viewpoint of a present where the suspicion must be that Putin is putting into practice these grotesque Rashist-geopolitical ideas.⁹

The conversation that generated these themes, and others besides, was staged in the form of an ‘interview’ in which Vitali Vitaliev (VV) was asked questions by Chris Philo (CP), Editor-in-Chief of the *SGJ*. The interview took place on Monday 16th May, 2022. It was conducted online, enabling an audio-recording and the automatic creation of an audio-transcript, although the latter needed to be fully edited by Philo, checking virtually every word against the original recording, to create the ‘clean’ transcript below. The text here does stay close to the original dialogue, but with a few short passages removed because they did not usefully advance the discussion. There has also been some tidying up – inserting punctuation, removing hesitations and ‘you knows’, adding occasional clarifications of meaning (in square brackets [...]), occasional minor

reordering of sentences for clarity – but the basic rhythm of speech has been retained throughout. The text has been reviewed by Vitaliev, and some further small changes – corrections of errors and changes of emphasis – undertaken. Philo has authored the short introduction and added endnotes with scholarly references and occasional elaborations of points raised, including cross-references to pieces with a Ukraine dimension previously published in the *SGJ*.

Transcript

CP: The main thing we're going to talk about is the current awful situation in Ukraine as of today, which is mid-May 2022. But first off, I just want to ask you something about your own history, your own Ukrainian heritage.

VV: You know here in this country, I am often confronted with the question, even after 30 odd years of living here and being a citizen, 'Where are you from?' For the last couple of years, and probably even longer, I'm saying with pride that I'm from Ukraine. It's stopped being 'from the former Soviet Union and all those territories': that was a bit of a stigma, at least that's how I felt, but at the moment I feel something completely the opposite, which is a new feeling for me. It's a feeling of pride. It's a feeling of belonging to the country that not only gave me its culture, its language and its wonderful nature, and so on, but is also giving the whole world a lesson in bravery, in democracy, in freedom and something that will be remembered for many, many years.

I was born in Kharkiv, and you probably heard that there was a little victory achieved there recently, and I think the Russians, the invaders, have left Kharkiv for good, unless they're planning to do something horrible to it, which I don't exclude; but they blew up the bridges. The saying goes 'if you blow up the bridge, it means you're not going to come back', so hopefully they left my city for good (albeit during WWII Kharkiv did change hands twice).¹⁰ There are still quite a lot of stories in my imagination, in my mind, of my friends sitting in the basement there, peeping out and saying Kharkiv is no more. And there is the reporting of the bombs hitting the school where I studied, at my university, at the research institute, a physical-technical research institute where my father worked all his life. So it felt like having bits and pieces of your life as a child taken away from you, one by one, and that was really physically painful.

Well, to come back to your question, I spent my whole childhood in Ukraine. I studied at university there and then, shortly after graduating, I went to Moscow and stayed until my 'defection' for about 16 years, becoming a journalist. But my childhood was not, I would say, particularly Ukrainian, because Kharkiv was right on the border with Russia and was traditionally Russian-speaking: it was actually – and still is – statistically the largest Russian-speaking city in Europe outside Russia itself.

We never made any distinctions between Russians and Ukrainians in our [school] class. Even looking back now, I'm not sure who was who, who was Russian, who was Ukrainian, who was Jewish. I know we had a couple of Armenian people and one Greek guy, but it didn't really matter. We all spoke the same language [Russian]. Ukrainian as a language was optional, so basically your parents had to choose whether they wanted their child to study it or not. And, of course, they would ask you: my parents asked me, and I said, 'of course, I want to learn Ukrainian because I live in Ukraine'. And we had the lessons twice a week; and people who didn't want to learn it, they

would go home for those hours. And there were some people, very, very few, who spoke Ukrainian occasionally, but, as I realise now, not ‘proper’ Ukrainian: it was a mixture of Russian, Ukrainian and South Russian and South Ukrainian slang, a kind of *patois*, which in Ukrainian we call *Surzhyk*. Out of 200 schools, there was only one Ukrainian, and it was not the full kind of secondary school, it was just eight years instead of ten.

So, basically, whatever Putin was trying to insinuate – that there was some kind of oppression of Russian-speakers – it’s total rubbish: it never happened, it didn’t happen in the Soviet Union, it didn’t happen after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and it was rather the other way around. There were some occasions when people who insisted on speaking Ukrainian – I remember very well how we had a couple of chaps from our faculty in the university speaking Ukrainian during the breaks – were accused of Ukrainian ‘bourgeois nationalism’ and expelled for speaking their own language in their own country. It is indeed very hard to comprehend.

So, as I said, it was a very mixed kind of background, but I was acutely aware which country I was growing up in, and I was interested in geography even then, so I knew exactly what our borders were, and I knew a bit of history. So, that’s, if you can call it this, my heritage, but, as I said, my family always spoke Russian and [I did] at school as well and everywhere else.

CP: If I can come in there, because what you obviously have given me just now is an extraordinary piece of geography, a geographical accounting of a place, of the people in a place and their inter-relations, and something of the ways in which institutions impact upon that geography, if you think about language and education as institutions. Before we talk specifically about the current situation, though, maybe I could draw out that connection to ‘geography’, because I know you’re a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society. You’re obviously a well-published author and travel writer, and I think probably on occasion you might call yourself a geographer. And I realise that you have published amazing books, *Passport to Enclavia* (Vitaliev, 2008) and then the *Atlas of Geographical Curiosities* (Vitaliev, 2022a),¹¹ which is out this year, so it seems you’ve always been interested in marginal places, enclaved places, anomalous places, and that has been part of the way in which you have been picturing the world over the years.

VV: Yeah, thanks Chris, good question. I would say there are various reasons for that. One is that shortly after I was born in a maternity home in Kharkiv, my parents – they were scientists, my father a particle physicist and my mum a chemical engineer – were then dispatched to work – my father first, then my mum joined him – to the Moscow region, to a factory that was, basically, producing atomic bombs: we couldn’t say it then, but I can say it now. From what I know it is still there. It’s actually been put on the map in Albuquerque, where there is the famous atomic energy museum,¹² but, when I visited it [the museum] about 20 years ago, it was conspicuous by its absence. They claimed to have all Russian, Soviet, ‘secret towns’ on the map, but that one was missing, and I came up to the Director and he asked me to provide some proof and I asked my mom, who was still alive then, to write a little memoir and hopefully they put it on that map.

So it was a town of about 20,000 people, I think probably more, behind the concrete wall where you couldn’t come in and come out without permission. Having spent the first three years of one’s life in an enclosed space like that couldn’t but have some psychological impact on me. Any child psychologist can probably explain it better, but I felt for the

rest of my life something like ‘being a little Houdini’: I wanted to escape; I hated closed spaces.

And that’s how my interest in geography came about. When we returned to Kharkiv after I was three, I was growing up, then going to school, and was acutely aware, at some point, that I couldn’t cross the borders of the Soviet Union, not because I didn’t want to, but because someone didn’t want me to. So, I said okay, I travel in my imagination, and was probably quite a rare school kid – my school classmates thought I was slightly mad – because my favourite reading was train timetables and atlases. I persuaded my father to subscribe to the railway newspaper called *The Whistle* and was reading it from beginning to end, and I was completely crazy about trains and then ships. I studied maps of foreign cities and so on. And when we started learning geography at school – by then, I was actually about 11, 12 years old – I knew geography, I think, much better than the teachers, so they stopped asking me to come to the blackboard, because they didn’t really know it [geography] that well. For me maps are always alive, and I always had this subconscious desire to escape, to broaden my horizons, that shaped me very much as a human being at that time.

Now, that’s why sometimes – you know, I’m teaching at Cambridge University,¹³ teaching Writing – I’m saying to my students that any great creative endeavour is the product of some spiritual hardship, it must be. You know, you must strive for something, you know this has to be difficult, maybe even painful to achieve something that you want to achieve. So, basically that’s how my interest in geography was shaped, but to me geography – you have your prerogative as a scientist, you might argue with that – is quite romantic. I can read books on geography at leisure and I love, for example, *Prisoners of Geography* (Marshall, 2016). And this desire to find little enclaves, little curiosities, for me it’s a non-stop search for something new and unknown. I’m not a scientific person at all – but I hope such a kind of geography, romantic geography, also has the right to exist, so I rather belong to that category.

CP: That’s an amazing answer and, to be honest, there are so many traditions, I think, within contemporary geography that would echo that sentiment, would actually talk, if you like, about issues of romantic attachment to place, spiritual attachment to place.¹⁴ All of those things matter as well [to academic geography]; it’s not just about the ‘hard science’ of what a place is.

VV: With some publications, I think that it’s kind of getting into science a bit too much, but maybe it’s necessary, I don’t know. But to get the kids interested, and the Royal Geographical Society is putting a lot of effort into that, I think it [geography] should never lose this romantic touch.

CP: Can I now turn to the current crisis? When we spoke previously, you said your initial response was almost one of paralysis. As someone who’s a writer, initially you couldn’t write about it, but now you are beginning to write, you’re beginning to present about the situation and, of course, contribute in other ways such as with fundraising. So perhaps that move from initial paralysis to an engagement, perhaps that would be useful to think about.

VV: Yeah, I had very few illusions about Putin and his horrible fascist rule and government, because I actually was one of the first investigative journalists in the Soviet Union who started investigating into the roots of Russian fascism in the 1980s. Funnily enough, they were in Leningrad: one of my last investigations, already published

when I was in the West, dealt with the Leningrad fascism.¹⁵ And you know where Putin himself comes from,¹⁶ but that would have been an impossibility [to have written then about Putin] because I didn't come across his name then and connection to that [fascism], but still the roots were there.

So, as I said, I had no illusions, but still when it happened and I woke up in the morning and found out about the bombing of Kharkiv, it was like [being] in a horrible nightmare dream, because I had such a dream as a child that Kharkiv was occupied by German Nazis in the 1960s. And so I think many kids of my generation heard family stories about the war [WWII], and now it's suddenly become reality. But, because I have a mixed background, mixed origins, and culturally I'm probably more Russian than anything else – probably half-Russian, half-British now almost, Ukrainian not so much, it is hard to explain – but, for me, I didn't really know what to think because I felt shame. My first kind of emotion was a huge shame to the point that, as someone put it, it was hard to speak; so ashamed and I felt such guilt, although I probably have to be one of the last people to feel guilty because I was always opposing that regime, the Soviet regime. But still, because you're part of it, you're part of that [Russian] culture, part of that country [Russia], as you conceive it, [you feel that] this is it, Russia is over: it will always be hated by civilized humans, and rightly so, and being even some little 'particle' of it was painful, really painful. And, of course, that was mixing with the almost physical pain of, as I said before, observing bits of your childhood taken away from you, like torn off your soul, out of your body.

So, yeah, I was completely paralysed, in the catatonic [state], for about a week or 10 days. I was spending my time listening to the horrible news and didn't really do much. I managed somehow to keep going to my College in Cambridge and still giving my tutorials twice a week, but that was all I could do. And then I was approached by my old friend Alan Rusbridger, who used to be *The Guardian* editor and actually played a big role in helping with my defection and me settling down [in the UK], and I had a column in *The Guardian* for a couple of years. He is now Editor of *Prospect* magazine,¹⁷ so he contacted me after some time and asked me whether I could write a piece on Ukraine. My first answer was 'no'; I said, 'I'm sorry, I can't, I can't think about it'; and he said, 'oh well, if you change your mind, just let me know, basically there's no pressure'.

And after a week or so, staying silent became probably more painful than speaking out: I knew this point would come because I'm a writer by nature, so I needed to put my thoughts on paper and started making little notes for myself. And, after a while, I felt like I was ready to share those notes and maybe it would make me feel a bit better, because that's what I do and that's maybe my own little contribution to the war. And that's how I started writing about it; I didn't write a lot, but carried on with my regular column for *E&T* magazine,¹⁸ which I have been doing for nearly 15 years when I was that magazine's Features Editor (in 2007-2020) until retirement; and I've done that feature for *Prospect*¹⁹ and maybe something else ...

CP: How would you try to think about how we understand what's happening here? I mean, what would be your interpretation of what's fuelling this? I suppose to some extent it could be the geopolitics or is it the psychology of Putin: what are the sorts of things that go through your mind when you try to explain what, in many ways, seems unexplainable?

VV: Yeah, it's basically a kind of an old story because, when I first came here and then moved to Australia for a couple of years, because I didn't feel safe in the UK at that time, I

tried to explain to the people there²⁰ what it felt like to be just a normal human being in a totalitarian society. And I tried to do it with a bit of humour as well. So maybe that was my mission: that's what I should have been doing because it's important.

But after a while, of course, you cannot stick to one and the same subject, and so I got interested in other things. And about seven or eight years later, when I already had the column with *The Guardian*, I wrote, 'Look, I haven't been back to Russia for many years: I don't know precisely what's going on, so I have no moral right to comment anymore, so please leave me alone and stop asking what's going to happen to Yeltsin²¹'. Instead, ask me about Liechtenstein or ask me about some little corners of Europe, then we'll talk. And that probably lost me a lot of money, because here in this country [UK] especially, people like to pigeonhole you: they want to frame you, so if you're an ex-Soviet, the fact is that you will remain so for the rest of your life, no matter how much else you do. And I completely went away from that. I was writing about subjects completely different: Europe, world geography, this kind of stuff. So, I basically said, 'Look, stop it, I'm not going to answer these questions [about the ex-Soviet world] anymore'.

Now, though, when the war started, and looking back, I can say that I sort of felt that it was going to happen; and I didn't really want to sound like a Cassandra who left the country and then makes prophecies from elsewhere. But unfortunately, I have to say that I managed to predict most of the things correctly, including the collapse of the Soviet Union, including the August 1991 coup in the Soviet Union, which I wrote about in my book *Dateline Freedom* (Vitaliev, 1991), that came out a week before the coup happened, a bit late, but still it had quite an effect.

Because I know the psychology – I may not be able to politically comment on what's going on – but I know the mentality of the people. And I have always been worried by Putin, extremely worried, and, with all my limited means then already, I tried to warn people against trusting him, against encouraging him in any way, against ignoring all his horrible deeds. But, unfortunately, people look at [me] and say, 'oh here's a kind of ditched lover, he will never be happy, he will always be grumbling about what's happening there [in Russia] because he is secretly missing it'. Nothing of the kind, you know: I tried to be objective and, it's a horrible thing to say, but now I can look back and say, 'I told you so', because I've been trying to hint that the man is capable of the most horrible of crimes against humanity, because of how he was brought up. In his background, there's nothing that we understand as human, starting from his childhood and the KGB School, his whole education and his whole upbringing were aimed at liquidating the last remains of human being in himself. And when a man like that gets such unbelievable power, and has it for 20 years, you know what the result is. The result is obvious.

CP: If we are going to centralise it with Putin, is the sense, for him, that somehow 'Mother Russia' has lost something, because it no longer has control over Ukraine? Do you think that he interprets it in terms of a longer, deeper history of Russian loss, loss of Russian power, or does he hark back to the Soviet era? Where do you think his coordinates lie?

VV: I think, just like Soviet leaders or the likes of Stalin,²² for example, or probably Brezhnev²³ – except maybe Khrushchev,²⁴ who had the remains of decency because he could look back at his past and acknowledge his mistakes – Putin, just like Lenin, didn't care about Russia: the only thing that they cared about was themselves and

their own power. So, all these rants [from Putin] about Ukraine and history, it's absolute nonsense, absolute nonsense from any point of view – including a geographical one.

People used to ask me here quite a lot, and still do, 'is Ukraine part of Russia, was it part of Russia?' This drives me crazy, because Ukraine was never part of Russia, that's what the war is about: it was part of the Soviet Union, but that's completely different. Russia was once a part of Ukraine, and Kyiv was once, in the eleventh century, the mother of all Russian cities.²⁵ When Moscow was still a little village, Kyiv already had some kind of democracy. Princes from Kyiv would try to unite all the surrounding territories, which is totally opposite to what Putin tries to present in his so-called writings.²⁶ What drove him was [and still is] just power, cruelty, selfishness, and probably envy as well, and obviously the desire to go down in history as the new Peter the Great,²⁷ whom he always admired.²⁸

CP: Well, that was what I wondered: I did wonder whether there was a certain appeal to that Russian imperial tradition?

VV: Oh yeah, yeah, absolutely – but he [Putin] is not very well educated. He drew all the wrong conclusions from the Russian history. Some historians are still trying to look for some kind of ulterior, even altruistic motives in what Lenin²⁹ did, even in what Stalin did, arguing that they were really thinking of 'the people': but nothing of the kind! They were a bunch of horrible criminals and terrorists, who only cared about their power from the beginning, and they understood that their power could only be maintained by one tool, which is fear: fear and crime and murder.

But why [turn on] Ukraine, people ask, why Ukraine? Because suddenly there's this country – which is on the border [with Russia], and is almost like the same country, as he [Putin] probably always thought ('there's no difference') – and suddenly it's gone ahead, in every way, even economically, although there's been a lot of corruption. But when I came to Ukraine last time, it was 2017, I was amazed at how advanced and how Westernised it looked, most of all in terms of democracy, in terms of the new generation of people who didn't have the Soviet seal of oppression on their faces any more. I'm talking about young people who are now fighting and showing amazing examples of bravery. They are people of a new generation: they're not related to Russians any more. They obviously have a much brighter future, and he [Putin] couldn't take it.

CP: It's interesting because in 2017 you wrote a little piece in the *Geographical Magazine* (Vitaliev, 2017a),³⁰ comparing when you went back in 1994, seeing the 'little beggar girl' in Maidan Square, with when you went back in 2016. Now, in 2016, you said that this [the girl] wasn't the image – the symbol – of Ukraine any longer, [the one] that you feared it might become if [Ukraine] had remained still haunted by the Soviet era, but that now the country is filled with a new kind of dignity.

VV: Absolutely. Actually, I'm quite proud because the column was reprinted by newspapers in Ukraine, which I was very happy about. The thing is that I was asking myself whether that seal of oppression disappeared from people's faces as a reaction to what Putin was doing to them. He immediately announced himself as the enemy of Ukraine, of that culture, and it was after the war in Donbas started, after the annexation of Crimea – each of these acts was paradoxically another step to uniting Ukraine. So, as I said, he united Ukraine like no one else in Ukraine's history. People in Kyiv are now joking that one day they will build a monument to him where the monument to

Prince Vladimir³¹ is now on Saint Vladimir Hill in Kyiv, because he achieved the almost unachievable, and he did it in such a short time. Force brings about counter-force.

CP: So, Vitali, you would agree with the argument that says what Putin's doing has backfired because he's actually really helped to cement a strong sense of Ukraine, an identity, a relationship to place and territory, that perhaps for some people wasn't there before, which is actually in complete reverse of what he intended?

VV: Exactly. It may be slightly different in the west [western Ukraine] where people still remember their parents being part of some kind of 'Westernised' society, because they only became part of the Soviet Union after the Second World War,³² but where I grew up it was the same people [who had lived for years under Soviet control]. I'm not saying that the people who live in eastern Ukraine and Ukraine as a whole were different from people elsewhere [in Soviet Russia]: they experienced exactly the same things, the same corruption, the same horrible party officials – hypocrisy everywhere, same thing. So why did Ukraine suddenly become so different [in its post-Soviet guise]? It was just because of that [Putin's antagonism], because suddenly this people felt isolated, and they were told that 'we' [Russia] want to destroy you just because you live in this particular corner of the world. And, of course, when something like that happens, people unite, and people start getting away from their enemy by every possible means ...

He [Putin] did this amazingly quickly because, as I anticipated it, with the collapse [of the Soviet Union], certain levels of the mentality, the seal of oppression, will take years and years, probably several generations, to disappear. But in Ukraine, it happened [swiftly] because of the huge pressure: the bigger the pressure, the faster it happens, basically. In a way, he managed to do it just in one generation, and at the same time destroying [Russia]. As I wrote in the feature for *Prospect* (see Note 19), every bullet that hits Ukraine ricochets into Russia, every single one, so Russia has been every day meticulously destroyed. While uniting Ukraine like no one else in history, Putin has already done, after a couple of weeks of the war, more damage to Russia than Hitler, Napoleon and Genghis Khan combined.

CP: I know it's difficult for you, Vitali, given the situation, but could you see that there is any reason why some people in Russia might feel aggrieved about the way in which the West has, if you like, treated its borderlands, and why the expansion of NATO³³ has indeed been regarded as a geopolitical threat? I know it's difficult to sort of turn the polarity, but, if you were perhaps looking from Russia, could you have any sympathy for their fears?

VV: I think I do know the answer, and in a way have given it already. And before I repeat it, I have to say that I only have one friend left in Moscow, whereas previously I had not a lot but a handful of friends, mostly former journalists. Well, now there's only one because most of them chose and prefer – and they are intelligent people – not to oppose what Putin did.³⁴ And not to oppose is to me the same as fighting alongside those murderers and rapists, because they're actually encouraging [them]. The answer is simple: mentality, their mentality stayed the same: we wouldn't do something 'stupid' that would jeopardise immediately our families, first of all our children, and ourselves. And, when you learn to live with this kind of attitude, for years and years and years, then, when a situation like this arises, you think subconsciously maybe 'what's best?' Just say, 'no, I'm against it' and become a pariah, suddenly lose everything you had, or

support it because maybe somehow or other it's going to be okay? I'm sure most of them are going to repent very, very bitterly, because this is not the situation that existed under Brezhnev: it is a serious thing, whereby people are dying in their thousands, people are getting looted, raped and so on, for no reason. That's the most appalling thing about this war: there is absolutely no reason, no visible cause for this, because Ukraine did absolutely nothing bad to Russia, there was no threat whatsoever, there were [and are] no Nazis in Ukraine.

CP: It's awful the way in which Putin has this discourse now about Ukraine being a place of Nazis and they [Russia] are going in to 'de-Nazify': this just makes no sense to me.

VV: There was actually an article on Wikipedia, I don't know who wrote it, which appeared shortly after the war, about 'Rashism' (see Note 3) – it's quite a large article, quite well-written – but it says that one of the main signs of Rashists or Russian fascists is that they call themselves 'anti-fascists', which is obviously absolutely bizarre.³⁵ You can't discuss it seriously, because fascism in Ukraine is completely 'non-existent', never was there, never will be.

CP: The manipulation of the argument [about fascism] here is a travesty.

VV: Yeah, it's painful to realise that quite a lot of people [in Russia] do support it [the war on Ukraine], but most of them are doing it out of social inertia that was part of the Soviet existence, and they're still carriers of this tremendous fear ...

CP: You can't underestimate the fear: I mean, it's easy for me to sit here and say people *should* be radical [opposing the war] when the implications for your family could be so hideous.

VV: Absolutely, but it is about fear *and* cynicism, because it is cynicism that is the moving force of Putin himself, and it was one of the moving forces of Soviet society for the 70 odd years of its existence – the total disregard of human values and just selfishness, and corruption, and it is all still there.

CP: Vitali, I suppose this is a difficult interview because it so deeply touches your heart and soul, but I just wonder if there's anything finally that you would like to say that would, I suppose, look forward and show whether you feel any optimism.

VV: I am probably feeling more optimistic now than a year ago, more than ever before. I mean, it's horrible to watch what is going on, to see this war which was unnecessary and could be easily avoided. But, if there is anything good about it whatsoever, if all these people did not die in vain – I mean normal citizens, peaceful citizens –, it is that each of their lives, their deaths, serve to accelerate the collapse of Russian fascism, let's put it like that.

And now we can try to generalise about this system that is over 100 years old, if you start calculating its existence from 1917³⁶, and probably we are correct [to diagnose it as Russian fascism]. And I'm sure geographers of the future will regard it in exactly this way. So, for 100 years, they [Russian fascists] were dominating that huge country, and probably still will for some time, unfortunately. But they are now looking down into the abyss because I think this is the end, which is going to be painful. There can be different moves backwards and forwards, but ultimately for Russia it's going to be extremely painful. As I said, Ukraine will survive it, will come out in glory, with flying colours, as one of the world's leading democracies.

And Russia will not survive, and only God knows what's going to happen there. I hope that, after a while, it will find its own way to democracy, but it will be very, very painful, this battle, which pains me as well. Indeed, I still love Russian literature, but, interestingly, less than before, because I look back and I can see some very dangerous trends – but that's a separate subject – in Russian literature which I didn't notice before. And Russian culture of course has little to do with the kind of totalitarian rule they've had for so many years. Culture sometimes thrives under oppression, you have to remember that, and it is painful for me to realise that this culture is now going to be rejected by most people worldwide, and probably rightly so – hence the pain.

CP: Vitali, it's been a pleasure, I mean it's been a difficult conversation because these are unbelievably difficult issues, and issues that we can't quite see how they're going to pan out in the future – and we can't quite see what kind of a new regime might emerge in whatever we might call 'Russia' in the future.

Notes

1. For some insight into the workings of this magazine, see a 1964 piece from the *New York Times* (at <https://www.nytimes.com/1964/06/07/archives/behind-the-smile-on-krokodil.html>).
2. Reference must be made to Gerard Toal's searching book-length examination of Russia's *Near Abroad* (Toal, 2019), which – taking its cue from Russia's assaults on Georgia (in 2008) and Ukraine (or, specifically, Crimea, in 2014) – seeks to answer the question, 'why does Russia invade its neighbours?' Toal addresses 'geopolitical fields' as spatial theatres of operations (here Russia's 'near abroad'), 'geopolitical conditions' as the infrastructural supports and spurs for assertive actions, and 'geopolitical cultures' as the ways of seeing space, place and territory through the aggressor's eyes (demanding careful 'critical empathy'). Vitaliev himself reviewed this book, concluding that '[t]he main attraction of *Near Abroad* is that it offers a fascinating and long-awaited look under the lid of Putin's aggressive and dangerously imperialist mentality' (Vitaliev, 2017b, p. 61). Vitaliev's review can be found in hard copy and also online (at <https://geographical.co.uk/reviews/item/2357-near-abroad-putin-the-west-and-the-contest-over-ukraine-and-the-caucasus-by-gerard-toal>).
3. 'Rashism' (at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rashism>). A recent opinion piece in *The New York Times* by historian Timothy Snyder (Yale University) has argued similarly that 'we need to say it. Russia is fascist' (at <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/19/opinion/russia-fascism-ukraine-putin.html?searchResultPosition=1>). The question is extensively debated in writing by Marlène Laruelle, French historian, sociologist and political scientist, who hesitates to depict present-day Russia as 'fascist' but is prepared to speak of a 'para-fascist' tendency fuelled by cultural 'doctrines that may share some conceptual features related to fascism' (Laruelle, 2021, p. 157).
4. Differing views are expressed about the extent of Dugin's influence, some suggesting that it has been and remains substantial, others that it may now have waned or never even been that pervasive in the first place. Alan Ingram, in a personal communication, argues that Dugin often proceeds 'in a sensationalist and mystical vein that plays well to the conspiracist/occult/anti-rationalist tendencies that are abroad these days,' but also that, 'because he's so well read and 'intellectual', [he] appeals to those looking for a guru while meaning he doesn't fit in [so well] in policy or university circles' (Ingram, 2022).
5. There are various other geopolitical constructions in play here, some speaking of a 'Russian world' containing all the 'Russian' peoples of the world – an extensive diaspora of 'Russian' peoples, not only Russian-speakers but all those who had once been part of the Russian

- Empire (1721-1917) – that is imagined as properly a single overall entity. For discussion, see Pieper (2020).
6. Another influence on Dugin is Karl Haushofer, the German practitioner of *Geopolitik* who unarguably influenced Rudolph Hess and Adolf Hitler (e.g. Barnes & Abrahamsson, 2015). Dugin appears regularly in Toal (2019), although explicit references to ‘red fascism’ are almost entirely absent.
 7. The term ‘Little Russia’ – *Little Rus* or *Lesser Rus* – began to be used in the later-Medieval period to reference what is essentially now Ukraine, and up until the late-1800s it was commonly used to describe those lands now designated as Ukraine that were part of the old Russian Empire. In some older geopolitical constructions, Little Russia is the crucial third ‘branch’, along with ‘Great Russia’ and ‘White Russia’, of Russia as a whole.
 8. Pieper (2020) identifies *Novorossiya* (‘New Russia’) as a term dating from Tsarist imperial times that delimits a common heritage supposedly shared between Russia and southeastern Ukraine (also Toal, 2019, Chap.7).
 9. Cf. Morozova (2009; also Schmidt, 2005), who writes about the eclipse of Eurasianism as an influential geopolitical doctrine for Putin. Insofar as Dugin is an advocate of Eurasianism, and insofar as his stance on Ukraine derives ultimately from his version of Eurasianism and how it inflects his reading of key geopolitical axes between Moscow, Berlin, Tehran and Tokyo, Morozova’s interpretation from 2009 may need updating. Rather, these ideas, even if not precisely in the form favoured by Dugin, appear shockingly relevant to the ‘thinking’ behind Putin’s invasion of Ukraine. News media pieces identifying the influence on the invasion stemming from Dugin, here cast as a ‘mystic neo-Nazi’, can be found, such as Blair (2022) also available online (at <https://www.thescottishsun.co.uk/news/8663158/vladimir-putin-mystic-rasputin-aleksandr-dugin-ukraine-russia/>).
 10. It is awful to report that just prior to sending this piece into production, on 23rd June, 2022, Russia had resumed the shelling of Kharkiv, leading Ukrainian sources to suggest that Russia’s aim is now to return the ‘front-line’ to this beleaguered city (reported at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/live/world-europe-6183916>).
 11. Intriguing parallel explorations of lost, invisible, forgotten, feral, unruly, enclaved, ghostly and emerging places by geographer Alastair Bonnett are *Off the Map* (Bonnett, 2014) and *Beyond the Map* (Bonnett, 2018). Some of Vitaliev’s ideas and writing for his books appeared in a series on ‘geopolitical oddities’ in the *Geographical (Magazine)*: eg. Vitaliev (2019) only available online (at <https://geographical.co.uk/geopolitics/seborga-the-history-of-a-micronation>).
 12. The National Museum of Nuclear History (<http://www.nuclearmuseum.org>). The theme of secret atomic sites, deliberately left off official maps, parallels the focus of work by artist-geographer Trevor Paglen in *Blank Spots on the Map* (Paglen, 2009) and *Invisible* (Paglen, 2010).
 13. Vitaliev currently holds a Royal Literary Fund-sponsored Writing Fellowship at Magdalene College, University of Cambridge.
 14. In this respect, it would be possible to mention all manner of humanistic, literary, emotional, psychoanalytical, non-representational and more versions of academic geography – not least contributions to the relatively recently founded journal *GeoHumanities* (<https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/rgeo20>) – that chime loudly with Vitaliev’s vision here. Specifically touching on ‘romantic geographies’, with some reference to Romanticism as a wider artistic-cultural-philosophical movement, see Philo (2013).
 15. Associations between this city – named variously Petrograd (partly as a reference to Peter the Great, perhaps the most infamous shaper of the old Russian Empire), Leningrad and now St Petersburg – and fascism, or versions of right-wing ideology, are occasionally reported: eg. see a 2015 blog by Jared Taylor, himself openly described as an ‘American white supremacist’, at <https://www.interpretermag.com/what-does-the-fascist-conference-in-st-petersburg-tell-us-about-contemporary-russia/>. As a reviewer of the present article remarks, Taylor ‘knows fellow fascists when he sees them’ (Anon., 2022).

16. Putin was born in Leningrad, as it was then named, in 1952 (<https://www.biography.com/political-figure/vladimir-putin>).
17. See <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk>.
18. See <https://eandt.theiet.org>.
19. Vitaliev's piece for *Prospect* (at <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/essays/ukraine-memories-of-home>), dated 7th April, 2022 and entitled 'Ukraine: memories of home', covers themes and develops arguments similar to those arising in this conversation (and the two would ideally be read together). Also see comments by Vitaliev in an online book review (at <https://eandt.theiet.org/content/articles/2022/06/book-review-red-leviathan-by-ryan-tucker-jones/>).
20. In Australia, Vitaliev wrote a popular column published every week in both *The Age*, based in Melbourne, and the *Sydney Morning Herald*.
21. Boris Yeltsin, first President of Russia (1991-1999).
22. Joseph Stalin, Leader of the Soviet Union (1922-1953). Stalin's appalling abuse of Ukraine, particularly in effectively creating the most devastating famine in the 1930s – the Holodomor (or 'hunger extermination') – that killed millions of Ukrainians, is a crucial historical context for the present situation (see Applebaum, 2018). Philo has used this case when teaching about 'genocidal geographies' at the University of Glasgow.
23. Leonid Brezhnev, Leader of the Soviet Union (1964-1982).
24. Nikita Khrushchev, Leader of the Soviet Union (1953-1964). Khrushchev was born in a village near the present Russia-Ukraine border and is sometimes regarded as 'part Ukrainian'.
25. Fascinatingly, an early piece (Gillett, 1922) in the *SGJ*, discussing the 'historical geography of the Black Earth Region of central Russia', hinted at the role of what is now delimited as Ukraine – also what became known for some time, if problematically, as 'Little Russia' (see Note 7) – in the origins of Russia as a whole. In effect, the author, A.M. Gillett, identifies the significance of what he terms the 'Kiev centre' from at least the 9th century: 'Kiev arose as a trading town on the Dneiper [River] banks at that point where the forest of the north merged gradually into the southern steppe, and soon became ... the chief town of the *Rus* [forerunners of the 'Russian people'] of the Dneiper' (Gillett, 1922, p. 3). Migration streams east from here furnished the 'stock' of population for what became Moscow, the core of the Muscovite Empire. Note that here the Westernised spelling of 'Kiev' is used, whereas the Ukrainian spelling, 'Kyiv', is mostly preferred throughout the transcript.
26. Putin's 'writing' on 'The historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians', dated 12th July, 2021, can be sourced in translation online (at <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/misc/66182>). We do not wish to quote him here (c.f. Toal, 2019), but echoes of Dugin's claims about the illegitimacy and threat of Ukraine (see Introduction) ring loud and clear.
27. For one appraisal of how Peter the Great (1672-1725) deployed 'geography' – surveying and mapping, expeditionary work, 'geographical description', and more – in his project of converting Russia into a formidable European power, with extensive 'imperial' acquisitions, see Shaw (1996). A piece in the *SGJ* from 1963 on the city of Odessa explained its origins, in 1794, as a deliberately located site for aiding Russian imperial expansion (Fox, 1963).
28. Putin has explicitly likened himself to Peter the Great and his geopolitical-territorial ambitions to Peter's imperial expansionism (see, for instance, this news item from 11th June 2022: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-61767191>).
29. Vladimir Lenin, Leader of the Soviet Union (1917-1924). The retrospective interpretation of Lenin – as genuine socialist champion of 'the people' against capitalist oppression, or as dictatorial creator of a secretive, murderous regime – remains highly contentious.
30. The 'little beggar girl' in Maidan Square (previously named Independence and, before that, October Revolution Square), central Kyiv, was half-submerged in 'coupons', a temporary and then wholly devalued currency, thrown at her by passers-by. Vitaliev (2017a) feared that this image would become, for him, iconic of Ukraine's debased condition, unable to escape the shadows of the Soviet era. This article can be found in hard copy and online (at <http://geographical.co.uk/ie/2052-ukraine-s-new-dignity>).

31. The monument, erected in 1853, is dedicated to Prince or Saint Vladimir (or Volodmyr), the Grand Prince of Kyiv and ruler of the 'Kievan Rus' (people), 980-1015, who became Christianised and 'baptised' his people. Hence, he effectively gathered into himself conjoint political and religious authority as a foundational figure in the making of what eventually becomes identified as Ukraine.
32. A piece in the *SGJ* from 2002 discussed forms of 'cross-border cooperation' in the domains of economy, culture and tourism across East Central Europe, noting that post-Soviet western Ukraine was on the fringes of certain regional policy and partnership initiatives which effectively pulled it into the orbit of more 'Westernised' Europe (Turnock, 2002). Another piece (Thomas, 1972) addressed urbanisation in European Russia, noting how Ukraine had particularly experienced rural-to-urban population transfers, while a third (Mellor, 1959) tackled regional policy *in* the Soviet Union and specifically economic policy in Ukraine.
33. The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), also known as the North Atlantic Alliance. The obvious 'Atlanticism' of NATO, to use a term deployed by Dugin drawing upon Mackinder (see Introduction), is regarded as supremely threatening from the standpoint of current (hegemonic) Russian geopolitical culture. A sense of the Soviet Union feeling hemmed in on all sides, but especially on its western borders by the 'Atlantic' powers, was conveyed by a piece in the *SGJ* from the 1950s that reappraised Mackinder's Heartland concept to take account of the 'USSR': 'There is much in Soviet literature to suggest that the Russians feel the fortress [of their Heartland] has become a trap. They have produced maps showing an almost complete ring of air bases around the Soviet Union' (Mills, 1956, pp. 146-147).
34. A few brave individuals in Russia have spoken out against Putin's 'war' on Ukraine, of course, but the personal consequences for them are considerable. One example of particular note here is Kamran Manafly, a Geography teacher at a Moscow school, who refused to teach what he regarded as 'propaganda', was forced to resign and flee for his safety, and posted his story on Instagram (eg. <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/asithappens/as-it-happens-the-monday-edition-1.6392168/this-russian-teacher-refused-to-show-kids-propaganda-about-ukraine-it-cost-him-his-job-1.6393443>).
35. Tools for understanding – if not remotely excusing or agreeing with – this 'absurdity' can be found in some of the academic sources already cited (eg. Ingram, 2001; Dunlop, 2004; Toal, 2019). In part, the argument from the likes of Dugin may be that fascism in its Nazi guise was primarily about *race*, about identifying and eliminating racial others or enemies, whereas his 'right-wing thinking' is shaped by *space*, is genuinely geopolitical and about securing spatial-territorial configurations conducive to better 'Russian futures'. Nonetheless, the 'civilizational' elements that stir into this thinking – and into other, related versions of Russian geopolitics (Bassin & Aksenov, 2006; Morozova, 2009) – very easily tip into ethnocentricisms, racisms and a possible 'scorched earth' policy, scorching *both* earth and people, when Russia invades. That, then, feels, sounds and smells like 'fascism'.
36. The year that the 'Russian Revolution' commenced, sweeping away the old Tsarist, imperial regime and replacing it with Communist rule that, from 1922, would be the basis for the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), controlling vast swathes of Eurasia, until the so-called 'Collapse' of the USSR in 1991.

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