



Winter 22

This was the one where we heard the missiles hit before we heard the air-raid sirens.

I was jolted awake by three explosions, far enough away to not be terrifying, but close enough to hear the impact of the strike, followed by the cascading sound of things collapsing in the distance. Then the howl of the siren. Then more explosions. I counted five, six, seven. There were fifteen strikes in total. The Russians were firing rockets from Belgorod at four in the morning, systematically disabling Kharkiv's energy grid. I had been told about this plenty of times. Belgorod to Kharkiv via missile was a sixty second journey, touching down before a dot could appear on a radar. Nothing a Patriot air-defence system couldn't handle, but the Kharkiv Patriots were spent. It wasn't so much that Ukraine was out of ammo, it was that the West was out of ammo. The individual European armies of NATO had assessed their own stockpiles and manufacturing capabilities, and the lesson learned from Ukraine was that no-one was ready. If America was compromised, how long would it take Europe to prepare for a Big War? In Germany, nothing less than a national conversation would be required. *Do we really want to go there?* It was one thing to build and export the best modern weapons, but reverting to the old discipline and competence, the legendary ruthlessness, this wasn't something you could do at the drop of a hat. Vast allotments of time would be required to discuss this. A referendum perhaps. Meanwhile, Belgorod Russians were volleying rockets across the border. Vladimir Putin had won his election, and was letting off some steam.

I reached for my phone to find out what was happening, but the power was out. The wifi router was dead. I furrowed my brow and pursed my lips. *Right. Got it. Winter 22.* For those of us in Berlin playing war chess, the thrilling realisation that Russia was not very good at conventional warfare had carried us through the first year of the Special Military Operation. Putin's war had quickly become our war, in no small part due to the appealing first wave of Ukrainian refugees, most of whom were attractive women with adorable children. Here they were in our homes, we were all in this together, especially when it

seemed like Ukraine was winning. Putin had clearly overreached. His armies had been smashed. And then the masterstroke of the first counteroffensive in which the impossible had seemed possible. With the West's help, Ukraine was going to take back the entire country. We had seen what had happened in Bucha. There would be no negotiating, no compromising. Russia would pay dearly for the slaughter and torture. Once the HIMARS were in place, once the Leopards were on the battlefield, once the airspace had been secured with F-16s and the full toolbox of superior weaponry had been unpacked, China would watch from the sidelines and allow Russia to lose. And then six months had passed and winter was approaching, and Russia had changed strategy and was firing expensive missiles at the power grids of every city in Ukraine. *Game of Thrones* memes on every social media channel. This is really going to hurt. Cue the next wave of refugees, the ones who hadn't fled, but who had been forced to leave the country due to terrorist activity. Here they were in our homes, wanting to know what the problem was. Macron was talking about the importance of offering Putin an off-ramp? Why was this? Scholz was concerned that supplying weapons might escalate the war? The war seemed pretty escalated. Russia had knocked out the power of an entire country in winter. Did we have any idea what this was like?

Well no, obviously not. But actually, yeah. Sixteen months later? March 2024? This is what happens when Russia takes out your city's power grid.

It's the middle of the night. You have your phone and your laptop, the battery charge of each at less than forty percent. You have been in the city for a couple of weeks, met some writers, eaten at some cool restaurants, seen some bomb damage, heard some stories, been sincerely complimented on your bravery for being here. When the explosions jolt you awake at 4am, you kind of selfishly wish the strikes had been closer, so you could throw on some rescue clothes and run outside to help. You'll need a map and a website to find out where the action is, but the electricity is off. You're going to have to wait for the electricity to come back on again.

And so you wait. The sun rises. You have light. You also have electric heating, something that doesn't concern you right now, but which will concern you in the evening when it starts to get cold. In Berlin, during the second wave of refugees - the graphic designer unable to design due to sporadic laptop access, the music producer unable to produce due to the power cutting out in the middle of a take - you have personally organised the purchase and shipment of four EcoFlow Delta portable powerstations to Ivano-Frankivsk without putting a whole lot of thought into what they might be used for. Electricity, probably. Now you're walking around Kharkiv in search of electricity.

At the risk of offending your Ukrainian friends, Kharkiv is a bit dusty and blighted in the post-Soviet style, only with enormous and really opulent supermarkets that are so much better than anything in Berlin. Excluding KaDeWe, the only thing you have seen that comes

close to competing with the fancy КЛАСС supermarkets of Kharkiv are the equally fancy COOP supermarkets in Zurich, and it is to the local КЛАСС supermarket you are walking right now. Much to your surprise, the supermarket is open. Massive generators are whirring in the background, and the entire neighbourhood has made a motivated run on the water aisles, buying bottles of water with an urgency you are only just now beginning to grasp. *Probably should buy some water*, you tell yourself.

You buy two four-litre bottles of water, haul them back to the apartment, return to the supermarket and start hunting around for a power outlet. There is a sushi bar (!) near the fish section with a large ergonomic curved eating bench inlaid with power-and-USB sockets for people who, you guess, want to surf the internet while eating sushi, and the entire neighbourhood has made a motivated run on these power sockets. The crowd around the ergonomic bench is four-deep, the crowd in this case consisting of fierce old men speaking fiercely to each other, mixed with an otherwise chill crew of young people who are here to charge their phones and socialise. It's like a party at home with scary parents. The girls are uniformly pretty, but there's something vaguely repellent about the dandyish young men in their hats and waistcoats with their earrings and interesting beards and intellectual demeanour, until it hits you: *they look like writers*. These will be your companions for the rest of the day, as you wait many hours for a shot at a power socket.

Right now, it's pretty boring - nowhere near as boring as it will become when you leave the supermarket and walk outside into a cold and dark city where there is absolutely, shockingly, nothing to do - so you activate the Instagram app on your phone out of habit, and a few frames from the previous day's feed manage to load. Top of the feed is a United 24 repost of a video interview with a fluently German-speaking Russian woman in Berlin, who has come out to vote for Vladimir Putin in the March 18 election. Unlike the vast majority of Russians in Russia, German-speaking Russian lady is out voting for Putin of her own free will, and she has helpfully-subtitled things to say about the country she lives in versus the country she is from, the gist being: *'My country is mighty, our president is strong,'* and *'Your country is not mighty, your chancellor is weak.'* Judging by the lady's voting clothes, this is not someone who could afford to live in Moscow, but she seems to be doing pretty well in Berlin, and, if you were to speculate, based on the completely unsolicited *'Our dad could beat your dad in a fight,'* her position on Ukraine is presumably the official Kremlin TV position, which is basically: *'The country is full of Nazis, kill 'em all.'* You remember a time when Putin used to refer to Ukraine as 'a brotherly nation' (as recently as December 2022, on YouTube), back when there was still some hope that Ukraine might embrace Russian occupation with the same free-will as German-speaking Russian lady. That time is over. Russian State TV now wants all the Nazis dead. And not just Ukrainian Nazis. The original source material. At home with Sputnik News and Russia Today and the unhinged hosts of Channel One and Russia One, German-speaking Russian lady is presently being invited to consider the German Nazi problem. Whose side will she be on if Putin escalates the war?

A fierce old gentleman has unplugged his powerbank, and you manage to glide in and jam your charger into a socket. The water aisles are empty. You stroll listlessly in circles for the best part of an hour. Your phone is now at eighty percent, so you unplug your charger and head back to your apartment. The thing to note here is that there is absolutely no light at all. It's pitch black. You're wearing your Bundeswehr thermals under your street clothes, and while the weather is mild by Kharkiv standards, it's still pretty cold. Navigating your way home involves activating the flashlight app on your phone as you trawl the dark canyons of a city without electricity. The air raid sirens are howling without pause. There is no one on the street. It's just you and the empty space in front of you. The unhinged propagandists of Russian TV have gleefully appropriated the old, over-the-top American threat of '*bombing a country back to the stone age*,' and this is kind of what it feels like. Everyone else has been through this before. You have not. Which makes you the caveman in this scenario. What do you want? Heat and light. Neither of which are available in your apartment. Not only is there absolutely nothing to do, the heating is off, the apartment is freezing, and the hand on the doomsday clock is a minute to midnight, blanket-wise. The lovely people who have rented you the apartment have evidently not considered the possibility of a missile strike on the city's power grid, and have furnished you with sheets and some kind of woollen comforter. The next twelve hours are going to suck. But this is why you are here. This is Winter 22, and you need to experience a Geneva Convention-defying attack on a civilian population to understand what happens next. What happens if Russia prevails in this war.

In Berlin, the winter of 2022 was gamed out on two chessboards: Ukraine v. Russia, experienced vicariously with adorable roommates, in which we knew it was cold and Ukrainians were suffering, but Ukraine was also winning. Russia's retreat to the Eastern Oblasts had been a great humiliation. This really was an army with its tail between its legs. Bombing the power grid was pathetic. Targeting civilians was not how wars were fought. It wasn't the best board, but we were cautiously optimistic. The Ukrainian people were resilient. They would make it though the winter. Putin needed an off-ramp because there was no way he could win. The other board, Germany v. Russia, and the pragmatic business of weaning the country off cheap Russian energy, this was a far more complex game. German manufacturing required gas. No gas, no industry. The moral imperative of standing up to authoritarianism was one thing, allowing the economy to crash was something else. So our hearts were on board one while our minds were on board two, and what our minds were telling us was that if it really came down to 'it's either us or them,' we would choose us. We were members of NATO. Ukraine was not. So if board one was lost, board two would at least resolve itself into the usual stalemate: *You're not going to attack us because we're too strong*.

I'm not sure the Putin voter on Instagram would agree with this. Some actual Nazis recently held a secret meeting where it was proposed that immigrants representing a threat to German values and security might be rounded up and put on busses and sent back to their home

countries, and yeah, well sure. I wouldn't be averse to German-speaking Russian lady spending some quality time in Russia. But the meeting was secretly recorded by journalists, and over a hundred thousand Germans (including many of my close friends) exercised their democratic right to take to the streets in protest.

Hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians also took to the streets in protest when Russia invaded their country two years ago. The Russians didn't care. Their country is mighty. Pointing guns at unarmed protestors is what they do best.

Howard Hunt 2024