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A pro-Ukraine demonstrator holding a sign depicting Russian President Vladimir Putin as Adolf Hitler at a protest against the Russian invasion of Ukraine, in Sao Paulo, Brazil, last Saturday. While it may not be possible to fully comprehend evil, one must not become indifferent to it and the suffering of victims, says the writer. PHOTO: REUTERS



Ukraine war – the evil that men do

How does one explain Hitler and evil? Even if we can't, what's more important is we do not look away and fail to respond



Chong Siow Ann

For *The Straits Times*

Adolf Hitler and Nazism – after all these years – have remained morally instructive and perhaps even more so now. One of Russian President Vladimir Putin's strangest justifications for the invasion of Ukraine – or the “special military operation” as he described it – is saving innocent civilians by “de-Nazifying” the country and toppling the government in Kyiv, which he claims has been seized by “extreme nationalists and neo-Nazis”, even though Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky is Jewish and had relatives who perished in the Holocaust. The war that the President of Russia unleashed has blighted the lives of millions of people and

raised the spectre of an apocalyptic nuclear war. The death and destruction, together with his political rhetoric, have prompted various commentators to compare him to Hitler and his actions to the evil of the Third Reich.

A FRIGHTENING MYSTERY

Evil is a word with ancient and religious origins that is emotionally charged, morally judgmental, and “full of fire and brimstone”. With time, however, the association with its theological basis has shifted to a secular one where it refers to egregiously cruel and morally repugnant deeds; or as one philosopher puts it – “absolute wrongdoing that leaves no room for account or expiation”.

Adolf Hitler has remained that enduring embodiment of unadulterated evil and has spawned an enormous body of scholarship to probe and understand the origin and nature of this evil.

Some historians view Hitler as the product of the profound forces of history, politics and the anti-Semitism of German society of his time; he is seen also as a cunning and astute politician and a mountebank who exploited the

German nation for his own self-advancement and self-aggrandisement.

Psychologists, psychoanalysts and even psychiatrists have also made forays into Hitler's past and psyche, and come up with an assortment of – at times absurd – explanations.

These ranged from the trauma of being brought up by an abusive father, to the malign effect of a missing testicle (yes, Hitler had cryptorchidism, or an undescended testicle), to a hidden shameful self-loathing (stemming from his suspicion that his grandmother had a Jewish lover that “tainted” him with Jewish blood), to an encounter with a Jewish prostitute who might have given him syphilis, and to having bipolar disorder with amphetamines abuse.

Professor of Psychiatry Leonard Heston at Minnesota University, who after conducting numerous interviews of people who either knew or had the opportunity to observe Hitler at close quarters, and after poring over Hitler's medical records, emerged rather sceptical of any sort of psychological explanation. He declared that, while Hitler has been called virtually every name in the psychiatric glossary, “none is supportable”.

Perhaps attempts to explain Hitler will remain in the realm of the unknowns and unknowables. For British historian Hugh Trevor-Roper, who wrote a

best-selling account of Hitler's final days, his subject remains “a frightening mystery”.

Another Oxford historian Alan Bullock, who after a lifetime of study of Hitler, summed up his frustration: “The more I learn about Adolf Hitler, the harder I find it to explain... If you ask me what I think evil is, it's the incomplete.”

And that is the very nature of evil – that we cannot systematically or scientifically study it. It is a subjective abstraction but yet something palpably real that exists beyond the limits of reason and comprehension.

Its effects can be hugely devastating but it can never be scientifically defined or understood. Not being able to fully understand evil also means that we would not be able to obliterate it, and we must live with the awareness that it will always be present for as long as humans are around.

But that does not mean we are helpless – the tragedy of evil is not the deeds perpetrated, but the effect and experience of the victim; what matters crucially is how we respond to evil and what we do to relieve the suffering of its victims.

A DANGEROUS SEDUCTION

Thinking of evil led me to think of Holocaust survivor and Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel, whose book *Night* I'd read when I was in my late teens. Wiesel was among the

millions of European Jews who were rounded up and sent to concentration camps during World War II to be exterminated.

He was 15 years old when he and his family were first deported to Auschwitz in occupied Poland. His mother and sister were murdered soon after. With his father, he was later made to go on a death march to Buchenwald where his father also died. Night recounts life in the camp and its daily and unrelenting horrors of gratuitous cruelties and sadism. I read the slim book right through and deep into the night, and I unsettled, terrified and later depressed me.

To this day and decades later, I am unable to forget some parts of the book, including the account of a child being hanged before all in Auschwitz, and how he slowly suffocated because his body was too light to tighten the noose. Made to watch this, the young Wiesel heard a man behind him ask: “Where is God now?” And he heard a voice inside him answering that unnamed man: “Here He is – He is hanging here on this gallows.”

Confronted with absolute evil, Wiesel suffered a profound crisis of faith. Even though to the end of his life he clung on to his Jewish faith, it was, in his words, filled with anguish and perplexity rather than fervour and piety.

When he was later liberated by American GIs at the close of the war, he remembered their compassion, but above all, he was

grateful for their rage at what they saw in the concentration camp because it contrasted with the baffling indifference that the rest of the world had shown to the suffering and industrialised killing of millions of Jews.

Many years later, in a speech in the White House, Wiesel spoke of this indifference and how it can be both “tempting” and “seductive” as it is so much easier and less troublesome to look away from the victims and get on with our life. But that doesn't get us off the hook. “In a way, to be indifferent to that suffering is what makes the human being inhuman,” he said. “Indifference elicits no response. Indifference is not a response.”

RESPONSE TO EVIL

With that in mind, how do we respond to what is happening now in Ukraine, with the deliberate levelling of cities, towns and villages, the killing of thousands, the displacement and miseries of millions? Is all that not a form of evil?

How does one comprehend or justify the atrocities in Bucha – the mass graves and bodies of civilians scattered along its streets?

An article published by the Russian state-run news media RIA Novosti offers one perspective: with President Putin's de-Nazification of Ukraine, “Nazis who took up arms should be destroyed to the maximum” and “any organisations that have associated themselves with the practice of Nazism should be liquidated”, together with the purging of a “significant part of the popular mass, which are passive Nazis”.

It is a chilling expansion of the scope of the campaign, from toppling the leadership and destroying armed opposition to targeting “passive Nazis”, which probably means the majority of the Ukrainians.

As the horrors unfold, many countries, including Singapore, have condemned Russia's invasion and imposed sanctions. As Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan explained, Singapore had to act when principles and norms of international law are violated, when a big neighbour invades a smaller one, trampling over the concepts of territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence.

I'm not sure how many of the 60 per cent of Singaporeans who were polled had expressed their support of the sanctions did so because of these espoused principles. But I would think that most have felt revulsion and moral outrage at what has happened and is still happening in Ukraine, and know evil when they see it.

In the face of whatever evil being done to others, we should recall the incandescent words of Elie Wiesel: “We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere.”

If anything, it is our moral duty not to be indifferent.

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