

Onderwerp: A Meditation on Train Stations

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A Meditation on Train Stations

On Total War and Individual Responsibility, 2/2

TIMOTHY SNYDER

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“If you weren’t here, then you won’t believe it.”

Thus the gentle pronouncement of the distinguished literary scholar, walking slowly next to me in the dark, during our second evacuation from the train. It’s an ironic point, after a lifetime proclaiming the power of words.

But he is right. Knowledge demands presence.

Ukraine has an excellent rail system. In times of peace, and even in times of war, its trains run on time. This summer, though, has been hard. The departures board at the Kyiv station announced a two-hour delay for our night train. It was not that the departure was postponed. Our train left the station as scheduled. Passengers were being warned, rather, of an anticipated delay caused by predicted Russian drone attacks.

The forecast was reasonable; there were two drone attacks on localities along our route, and thus two evacuations. The engineers had to make

two unplanned stops at small train stations, and the passengers twice had to exit the train and follow the conductors to safety. In the end, though, there was no delay; the crew made up the time.

“If you weren’t here, then you won’t believe it.”

The little indisputable realities of, say, an evacuation, have no easy correlate on the screen or on the page. I can strain after them with these words I am writing now, after the second evacuation, back in my compartment, but I can’t quite reach them.

The bearded, white-haired scholar walking a bit too close to the edge of the platform. The smiling conductress with her orange vest and simple commands walking over gravel in what might not seem to have been the most practical shoes. The reassuring beams on the ground from the one person in twenty or so who thought to pack a flashlight. The Milky Way; the artificial satellites; the one mysterious aircraft. The encounter of confusion and good will as passengers from two different trains going in two different directions are called back to board at the same time. The smell of swine through my open window as we get going again. The engineer racing to make up time.

“If you weren’t here, then you won’t believe it.”

Seeing is believing, and not seeing is disbelieving. Choosing to disbelieve, choosing to lie, requires looking away. Active separation, moral separation, depends on not being there. In an age of virtual reality we can all look away; we need virtuous reality, the bit of labor it takes to come and see, to listen and learn.

Second evacuation

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The people who hold the most political power in the United States choose not to see Ukraine. The president has never visited. The secretary of defense has never visited. All of the American support of Ukrainian civil

society, all of our support of journalism, all of our support of the army: that has all been halted, and with chances for conversations.

And the end of our support changes the subject of conversations. The American president has enabled Russian drones and missiles to kill people, which perhaps makes it more awkward for Americans to recognize the reality we co-create when we elect such people.

There is looking away, and then there is looking away into an imaginary middle distance and telling a self-serving big lie.

American leaders, the president in particular, blame Ukrainians for problems he creates himself. He orders a war with Iran that drives up oil prices. This helps the aggressor in Ukraine; it allows Russia to pay for those drones and those missiles. But what serves Putin does not serve Americans, who pay more at the gas pumps. And so the American president blames the Ukrainians, people who die at gas stations thanks to his actions, for greater household expenses faced by Americans, which are also a result of his policies.

This sort of self-serving contradiction is so cruel that it has to be seen as an element of war. One person caused people to die at the gas pumps. And that same person caused other people to pay more for their gas. And then that very person tells the people who pay more to blame the people who get killed. If we accept that, we are endorsing a big lie, and so, in a small everyday way, becoming aggressors ourselves.

Perhaps we cannot stop this right away; but we can see it.

One thing I see on this train is that Ukrainians choose to keep going. I don't want to romanticize; the suffering and the grief are under the eyes, and in the public memorials, and everywhere. Every attack by the enemy hurts, as does every betrayal by an ally.

The word "resilience" is meant kindly, but I think it misses something. Human beings are not rubber bands that snap back. Each injury means an adjustment, a change, a way through and around, found by a person with help from others. It takes patient labor to make everyday lives coherent,

despite everyday pain. To keep going.

There is something to learn from people who deal with the numerical equivalent of a 9/11 every three months, or, in proportion to population, every ten days. From people who can evacuate a train without making a fuss. From people who get in their cars and drive hundreds of miles past the blasted gas stations to deliver donations at the front.

The literary scholar had taken an overnight train to Kyiv to discuss a paper about a poet. And now he was taking an overnight train to get back home. He made it just fine.

“If you weren’t here, then you won’t believe it.”

Or, as the poet in question put it, “the simple eye” sees through the vast lies of the powerful to the small acts of courage.

Kyiv-Chelm train, 16-17 September 2026.

This is the second of two essays written at the same time on the theme of “Meditations on Stations”; the first ran yesterday.

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