

In Kyiv, I saw Dante under sandbags – a modern image of the hell of war

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I've reported on conflicts for 20 years, and I'm not afraid to be **blunt** about Russia's disgusting war of aggression on Ukraine

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I took quite a lot of photos on my phone when I was in Ukraine this year, but this one **jumped** out at me as I was **scrolling** through them. Here we have Dante – the Italian poet, philosopher, writer – with his marble head **poking** up out of the sandbags. It's in a park on Volodymyr Hill in the centre of Kyiv.

It's not just an **arresting** image. Dante is a **harbinger** of the Renaissance; he's a **symbol** of culture and learning. And that is the opposite of war, which is a **regression** to dark times. This is what Ukraine and Kyiv are having to labour under – and so Dante finds himself **stifled** by sandbags. Of course, one also thinks of the Divine Comedy and the seventh circle of hell, which is violence. That's what the people of Ukraine have been **enduring**: a modern circle of hell.

The fact that Dante had to be covered with sandbags tells you everything – the Russians are attacking things that are nothing to do with a military campaign. That is a particular hell, when civilians are seen as legitimate targets for an advancing army. And as soon as I see this image, all of this **floods** into my mind.

I took the photograph when I was interviewing members of the Ukraine Freedom Orchestra. Some are refugees who lost their homes; some are serving soldiers who'd been given special **dispensation** by Volodymyr Zelenskiy to spread Ukrainian culture and art. They went off on tour in the summer and played the Proms in London.

I'd never been to Ukraine before 2022 and I look back on my time reporting there with a lot of sadness. I'd always heard that places like Kyiv and Odesa and Lviv were beautiful cities, and it is indeed a beautiful country with beautiful people. But the first time I went had to be under these circumstances. I **recall** the people I met who are now refugees, who have lost their homes, their **livelihoods**. I hope to go back in time for the anniversary of the war in 2023. To think it's still being fought almost a year on is appalling.

And that's not just from Ukrainians' point of view but, frankly, from Vladimir Putin's: he thought this would be over in days. Now Ukraine and Russia are locked into this long war of **attrition**, it seems, particularly in the east, with the Russians sending in [Iranian kamikaze drones](#) every now and again. The American writer Francis Fukuyama said that he understood that some Russian soldiers in the first wave of the invasion had their **dress** suits with them for the military parades that would take

place in a week, after they'd conquered Kyiv. There are so many young **conscripts**, mainly from the outlying areas in Russia where life is tough; this is also a tragedy for many of them and their mothers and fathers. So many lives have been broken by the vanity of one man.

I've been covering wars and conflicts for 20-odd years, from East Timor to the Middle East to west Africa. But I wasn't expecting anything like this. This is two sophisticated countries with modern weaponry and modern armies fighting each other on European **soil**. Two national armies going **toe-to-toe**. That is unprecedented in [Europe](#) since the second world war, even taking into account the awful conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, which I covered.

We always think of history moving forward in a direction that takes us to a better place; we like to think that we move from the dark to the light. Yet we've gone backwards....

Has this war affected my sense of what I do as a journalist and broadcaster? I'm not afraid to be blunt about it. I'm not going to be "well, on the one hand this, on the other hand this" when describing what fundamentally happened. The bottom line is that Putin started an illegal war. He attacked a neighbour, unprovoked. It's an utterly disgusting war of aggression. I'm not going to try to balance that act of aggression with talk of how he's worried about Nato expansion. I'm too old for that shit. Would I have felt I could say this 10, 15, 20 years ago? Maybe not. But I'm getting on, and sometimes you have to call a spade a spade.