

# News From Ukraine

by [Justin Wong](#) (June 2025)



The Brothel, Vincent van Gogh, 1887

*...the cankers of a calm world and a long peace –Henry IV  
part 1*

## Chapter 1

Much of the carnage that so characterised European civilisation in the first part of the twentieth century,

miraculously disappeared in the second part. There were reasons why life as we knew it was no longer synonymous with violence and bloodshed. Such as the formations of bodies—NATO, the European Union, etc. Countries became reliant on each other for trade, more than this, many shared a common currency.

This world—the one of relative stability—was the one I came up in. It was all I knew, and thought I would know. I became politically active at the end of history that was no end of history at all. From the majority of time since I left University, in between odd jobs, I worked as a European correspondent. I was asked to cover elections, political movements and at times, unrest. This job was exciting, unpredictable, tumultuous, though not violent. Never once in my career did I sense that my life was in mortal danger. All of this was to, as things inevitably do, change.

## **Chapter 2**

In the spring of 2022, Russia declared war on Ukraine. This was horrific, naturally. The rest of the world, myself included, looked on at this in shock. The dream of peace—one unending—was slowly being upset. Cycles of history—ones many thought they cracked the riddle of—were beginning to repeat. War was being waged. Whenever I travelled, a sense of anxiety was being felt within nations not directly affected.

Such an event raised a plethora of questions. Why them and why now? And will it spread to their neighbours? Was Putin's attack a catalyst to something more Universal and insidious? Will it spark a world war of such horror that it will make the preceding ones look like a hissy fit in comparison? I couldn't say my mind wasn't awash with such perplexities: Bloodshed, destruction, death. Though I had other things to concern myself with as my worst nightmares came true within the living

nightmare of this life.

### Chapter 3

When the war broke out, the newspaper I worked at—*The British Herald*—already had a reporter in the Ukraine. Considering the magnitude of the event, and the fact that all eyes were on it—people could talk of little else—they wanted to send out into the carnage another journalist. A number of names were brought up—mine included. I was a natural fit, central and eastern Europe were the territories I covered most frequently. My mouth voiced no exception to this, but my physiology was a different question. My heart, my nerves, my mind, my bowels, my Soul.

Of course, I didn't want to voice this out loud. These objections. I had no desire to be denounced a coward amongst my ilk. Someone who was willing to carry out this noble and necessary profession in times of peace, but willing to throw in the towel, the moment the air became scented with danger.

My editor eventually arranged, as I suspected she would, to send me there. I was to report on the decrepitude; the bullets, the bombs; the following destruction, the dispossessions, the deaths. I was stationed in Germany for a quick assignment when I heard the unfortunate news. It would be two weeks to the day when I was supposed to arrive there. I desired to relax my mind before this came to pass. I decided to stop off in the city of Prague before I was to leave. I passed through it intermittently once, but now I desired to know it with a greater intimacy denied me in my previous foreshortened visit.

More than this, I longed to calm my mind away from the destruction to come. This city with its endless riches, art, sculpture, tradition and history, etc, was my way to do this. Though even I wondered to what extent creation could cover

destruction.

## Chapter 4

I arrived in *Praha*, considering how close I was from the place of my departure, the flight was quick, I checked in and laid low on my first evening there. I ate fast food and streamed movies. My every laugh was followed with a shock of terror—a remembrance of the assignment. War.

I managed to sleep intermittently and the following day—the new dawn—I explored the city.

It was a place of ceaseless wonder. Sublime architecture was omnipresent, even down the most humble and indistinct streets. Then there was sculpture that was scattered about the city, and stumbled on quite unpredictably, even in places one wouldn't expect to find it. Then there were the churches, the cathedrals, some still standing from centuries, millennia. I knew whatever riches this city had, it couldn't be known in the two weeks I had to explore it. Though explore it I did. The institutions, the concert halls, the neighbourhoods, the libraries... The museums, the towers, the pubs, the castle on the hill.

It made me sad that I was leaving one vision of Europe—after the fall of communism—for a newer one, equally brutal as the dark days we only recently—in living memory—managed to crawl out of.

As beautiful as the Ukraine—Kiev—was, wouldn't it make me weep to look upon its disintegrated splendour. A once proud standing world, in ruins. My mind naturally wondered on these possibilities, not only that, but my potential demise within it.

No matter how much I was lost within this foreign city, with

its treasures of times past, my mind thought of little else. What didn't help much was the overwhelming support the Czechs had for the Ukrainian people. Flags of the country to the east of them abounded throughout the city. This was not merely through certain apartment buildings of the citizenry, though on government buildings also.

I witnessed a similar fervour on my sole return to England since the war had begun, though it was not quite to this degree. One afternoon whilst waiting for a tram to take me to the centre, I was greeted with a vehicle painted with the Ukrainian flag across the entirety of it, the whole carriage in yellow and blue, against the grain of the others in the city. Such a spectacle couldn't serve as anything except an omen for the task laid before me.

Though unbeknownst to me, in the immediacy of the situation, it wasn't difficult to understand the overwhelming support the Czech's had for this country over the eastern horizon. In Russia invading them was this not a repetition of history? When both countries were satellites of that grand Soviet menace which dominated Europe's eastern half. Did the Czech's see in the Ukrainian war, the possibility of their own invasion? And could it thus be seen as really about themselves rather than the other. And in asking for whom the bells of war tolled, did they find out that it tolled for thee? All this remained unanswered, though an anticipation to know sparked universal unease.

## **Chapter 5**

The life I came to live was hazardous, itinerant, uncertain. What else could the days of a foreign correspondent be? I had no home to return to. I was shipped from one place to the next depending on how the world was unfolding at that particular moment—the turmoil flowering as I saw it.

War withstanding, this could be an exciting way of life, I never knew where I could be from week to week, month-to-month. Though it obviously hampered me in certain respects, maintaining relationships with family, friends, girlfriends.

Throughout the years I had several romantic relationships with the opposite sex. These proved to be passionate, exciting, though doomed to dissolution. My way of life and the consequent long distant nature of these relationships made this so. I have no regrets with this. I always put my work before my personal life—the professional above the private. Whether I came to regret this decision would be something I would find out in later life. Though as of yet I didn't. I figured that all was not over. I still had life before me to nurse love.

Though this didn't mean that I didn't get lonely, that I didn't have the desire to seek out the company of women. I couldn't say why, but the feeling overcame me powerfully in the previous weeks. Intensifying madly. I couldn't help but think this had something to do with my assignment. My being shipped to a place where bombs hailed from the sky numerous as leaves in autumn.

With such a feeling overwhelming me, I decided to seek out the company of the arms I so desired.

## **Chapter 6**

It is quite shameful to admit that some people don't visit Prague for the culture and history it possesses in infinite supply—the crystallisation of the medieval and Renaissance heights that remain a constant witness as time passes. Though some seek not solace in its Palaces, churches, castles and tenderly cultivated natural world, but in its houses of vice.

It is famed for its strip clubs, its sex clubs and other seedy

dens. In addition to this, there were stores specialising in marijuana products which were legion in the city and found down almost every street of its centre and open in the day. But the city's erotic underbelly came lucid at night. Walking down the commercial heart, I was accosted by men searching for punters to go into their 'free to enter' clubs. Curious as to this, I went into one on an occasion to find that the atmosphere, the music, and what was on offer displeased me. I always found the act of women just removing their clothes in front you to be a form of torture, so much so that I wondered what people got out of it. This was the half, rather than the whole hog of sin. But such entertainments tend suit the married and betrothed, which is why groups—composed primarily of men—flooded here for stag parties. The act of women merely unveiling herself in front of attached men serves a middle ground between adultery and fidelity.

Though as I pledged myself to none, body and soul, and thus needed to not be true to another, I decided on something other than places where crowds ogled women in displays akin to a freak shows.

On one evening, someone quite unexpectedly handed me a card advertising massage services. I had no way of knowing what this advertised was completely above board, but I knew what I wished for. Besides a massage might calm me down from, my body grown understandably tense from contemplating dire possibilities. My death.

## **Chapter 7**

When I was walking towards the Klementinum one evening, after crossing the great Charles bridge, bedecked with statues of saints, the Madonna and the child Christ, beneath which the Vltava River gently flowed, I was approached by an anonymous figure that walked over to me out of the shadows handing to me

a card. I assumed his game was more disreputable than it was in actuality—by this I mean narcotics. Although he like the figures in the not-too-distant Wenceslas Square, was marketing another form of vice—sex. Though this club—a few miles from the centre—offered me more of what I was after—intimacy rather than spectacle. In this environment you would be alone with the girl of choice for half an hour, one hour, or an hour and a half.

I was hesitant regarding whether or not I should do this, there were always tales about how these things are, the erotic—sex work in its varying degrees and shades—being a means to bamboozle the unsuspecting in a moment of vulnerability. This shouldn't be the case, here in Prague, nor back home for that matter. The exploitation of sex was very much permitted in this increasingly enlightened world, sure that it was done under certain stipulations of course. Only the sex worker was allowed to profit by her body, this discarded pimps, and them working like most are condemned to do for employers—in brothels. This law, although legislated with the best intentions, was naïve at best. In my experience promiscuity always takes on a social characteristic, whether it is in the park, bathhouse, brothel or massage parlour. It is not an accident that this is so, seeing as sex, especially when promiscuous in nature, can so often spill over into violence. This as far as I could see was unchanged, regardless of a shift in laws and attitudes.

But did legalisation, constantly being pushed, destroy the stigma associated with sex? Not quite, and as much as people think that we have enlightened attitudes towards everything sex—particularly in the west, it still carries with it centuries old shame, and perhaps always will, because they are inextricably linked. Even in the lax age of anything goes, it is still not right to proclaim in polite society that one has paid for sex, despite the fact that this for the most part is what our erotic life has devolved into. Abysmally so.

Musing upon these things, alone to myself in my hotel room, I contemplated whether or not to go through with it, to book if not a night of passion, then an hour of it. Doing some research, the place seemed legit, by the reviews this was somewhere not to fleece you out of your money.

I went on the website—the one written on the handed business card. On the website there were photos of the girls—doubtless fake so as to not reveal to the world, their identities. It was here that I was told that I needed to text a number to arrange an appointment. I did this and someone texted back—a madame in this case—asking me for a preferred girl and time.

I told her the time of 9pm, which even in this hour was past the emergence of dusk, when the city was black, when lamplights illumined the roads. As for the girl, she was called Marissa—or at least this was the name she went by. Her pseudonym. From her description, and photos, she seemed like my type. Blonde, petite and innocent—an oxymoron I know, considering her profession. But all of this was a risk on my end, I had an inkling her photos were fake, besides, they showed a blurred countenance.

I was a mixture of emotions after I made my appointment. Excited, anxious, scared. I didn't know what awaited me at the texted address, this house of ill-repute. Despite these reservations, I went through with it. Of course, the fear in a situation like this was minor compared to the fear of war that awaited me a short distance from here but a world away. I showered and tried at least to make an effort to make myself look presentable. I shaved; I applied cologne. I didn't desire to go into this situation sweaty and unclean, even if, after all, I was paying for it.

I went out, leaving my apartment an hour before my scheduled time, into the city using a tram still operating in the night hour, though not so crammed as a few hours before, when people were returning from home and school. There was plenteous room

for me to sit, flick through my phone, before getting off at my desired destination. When I arrived there, the city looked dull and gloomy, the night robbed the city of much of its wonder, obscuring with shadow, its splendour.

Although the tram took me but a portion of the way, it was adamant that I walk the rest of it. The night veiled all of this—a city both foreign and unfamiliar to me. Though it was still spring, so there was a chill and freshness in the air, so that I felt as if I wasn't walking a metropolis, with all of the ill-associated pollution. Despite the coldness that crept in with the disintegration of the day, the walk was pleasant in itself, covered as I was in a thick mac—one that got me through the horror of so many European winters. I relied on my phone to find this house of ill-repute, this den of reprobate desires. Mine no less.

After a little hesitation—going down the wrong avenues and side streets, I arrived at the address, as nervous as I can be in such circumstances. The establishment was rather indistinct and nonchalant, just being a door, that gave no clue to the services it provided, so that one would mistake it for an opening that led into a block of apartments, or a side entrance to one of the neighbouring businesses. As could be guessed, from its position, and the hours it operated it was a knocking shop. I rang the bell. After a few seconds of deliberation, a girl answered to whom I made it clear that I arranged an appointment.

She welcomed me and told me my girl would be ready in a few minutes. She sat me down, told me to take off my shoes, and gave me a pair of customary slippers—a nice touch. It was in fact a couple of minutes I had to wait in long suffering, until the girl Marissa was revealed to me. I wasn't wrong to assume that the photos associated with her namesake were fabricated. Despite the misleading way they advertised the girls on their roster, she was nevertheless attractive and appeared more so when she revealed to me, her nude flesh.

One is always made to feel quite nervous in these circumstances. In order to break the evident tension of two people who have revealed themselves to each other in their nakedness, I asked her something about herself.

“So, where are you from?”

“The Ukraine, have you been?” she asked me.

“Oh no, not yet,” was my polite but accurate response.

## **Chapter 8**

I can't say I didn't exit the massage parlour feeling relaxed, not just in body but in mind also. Marissa was an attractive, jovial and amiable girl despite the current extirpation of her homeland. I went there to get my mind off my coming assignment, though felt myself more drawn to it. I managed through interrogation to get more information from her. As it turns out she moved to the Czech Republic five years ago. Before the war. In regard to family, she talked of a grandmother—stuck in Kiev in the midst of destruction and bloodshed.

I have learnt the general public are quick to judge the women in her profession, saying that it is a station in life beneath the dignity of women. Though from the way she described it she was doing what she did for quite noble reasons and sent her isolated Grandmother money every month.

Maybe this kind of thing took me some getting used to, especially being from the developed west, with its welfare state and safety nets that other cultures are kept afloat by family, or else community. In the case of girls such as Marissa, prostitution, the thing so often judged on the surface, is done often for a greater, unseen moral purpose. One could say that there were other, less degrading ways of

achieving these aims. Though is it realistic that a girl in her early to mid-twenties to earn the kind of money she makes likewise whoring? This is a particularly true when one considers how dismal the average wage in central and eastern Europe was.

Such money would be insufficient to keep body and soul together to say nothing of a surplus to send to her suffering invalid stranded in Kiev. Did this make me develop a fondness for her? It is not considered particularly wise to fall in love with someone so loose and easy of virtue to be in her line of work. Despite this, she possessed a quality of character, and selflessness all but lost on women in the west. All of this along with the fact that she was in frequent contact with her grandmother made me conclude that I needed to see her again. For I had a plan.

## **Chapter 9**

I didn't need to go to Ukraine, to be in the midst of the warzone, to put myself in mortal danger. But remain put, to stay where I am. Here. The Czech Republic. Prague.

Though I would tell my editor on Fleet Street that I was there, she would be none the wiser.

This wasn't to say that I wasn't going to carry out my assignment—to describe in graphic detail, the brutal conflict, to see through hearsay, the bullets, the bombs, the crumbled edifices.

Though could I do this whilst remaining stranded where I was? If I was going to lie, to falsify, then yes. I planned to visit the brothel on a weekly basis, to book an appointment with Marissa. From there she will tell me of the news from Ukraine, relayed to her of course, by her grandmother.

Was what I was doing fraudulent, dangerous even? Indeed, if the newspaper I worked with caught wind of what I was doing, and uncovered as it were, my web of lies and deception, I could be fired, and worse than this, shamed publicly.

Though rationalising this as many criminals and deceivers do, I didn't think my actions, or actions to be as immoral. People were suffering over there, Marissa's Grandmother amongst them, what exactly was the benefit if more were thrust into the carnage. This could be done without multiplying misery, and witnessing first hand, man's inhumanity to man.

This was my plan, the one I was going to carry out. There was no way that the newspaper could find me out. They didn't book accommodations for me in Kiev but instead paid my expenses into a bank account. That was it, my plan was hatched.

## **Chapter 10**

It was one week to the day that I booked my next visit with Marissa. This was when I was supposed to be in the Ukraine, and I gave every indication to my editor that I had stepped foot in that war bedevilled world. Of course, I did no such thing, I was still living in this calm and peaceable civilisation, lost amongst history and beauty.

That night I travelled to the brothel, knowing all too well its bearing, I knocked on the door and was greeted with my angel. The intimate acts were similar if not slightly more open born of the fact that this was our second meeting and thus were aware of each other with a profounder knowing. Though after what I thought was that necessary business of lovemaking, I turned and asked her "So, how is your grandmother? How is home?"

I handed in my first article three days after this. Here is a part of it:

*In this part of the world that knew peace and growing prosperity only recently, they have found themselves occupied by the alien force of their neighbouring power. Russia. The violence and destruction that has been unleashed on them is untold—buildings that were once functioning, proud and tall, have been reduced to no more than their constituent parts. Bodies are still being dug from beneath the heaps.*

My editor praised me for this emphatically, proud that one of their men was seeing in the flesh, this cataclysm at the hand of man. As if turned out, my ploy had worked. I was capable of documenting something I hadn't seen first hand. Though why should that matter? Wars are all the same, if you experienced one, you have experienced them all. It was adamant I saw things this way for the sake of my sanity and conscience.

I had a few days free before I had arranged another appointment with Marissa, I walked around the city, visiting the fortification of the Vysherad—the lower castle—with a church and neighbouring graveyard that was the resting place of some of the mighty Bohemian dead—Dvorak, Karel Capek, Jan Neruda. But the next day I decided on doing nothing, except lazing around in my hotel room. My article had been published in print and online, that was customary in this day and age. I was obsessively scouring the comments, which were largely positive. Although there were some people on the extreme edges of politics who saw Putin as attempting to denazify the Ukraine, as he termed it, the rest saw the war and the occupation of Russian forces in that country as a catastrophe that needed to be brought to an end immediately. To have peace restored.

Although it was pleasant to read the comments aside from the

odd lunatic, I had to write my next piece on the war, so I booked my next visit to the brothel.

I didn't know how Marissa kept her spirits up, knowing that her country was in peril, and more than this her grandmother was stranded in the midst of it. It would make most people with a moral sense develop survivors' guilt, knowing that she was in relative safety every living, breathing moment. But to be fair, there was always a sullenness to her, at least in my time of knowing her. I wondered if this was always a facet of her personality, or if it developed in recent months with the unfolding carnage the world was only too privy of.

I arranged my next appointment as I had to write my article. After saying goodbye to her, I sat and wrote:

*The people know they are now in a time of peril. Though everyone is trying to keep their spirits up. Nevertheless, the war rages on. People here have had their homes destroyed and have sought accommodation elsewhere. Worse than this, women have been rendered widows, their children without fathers.*

I kept this up until one day I went to arrange an appointment with Marissa, only to get a message back that read:

"She is not available. There are a lot of other girls you can choose from. I assure you they are all very good."

"Well, where has she gone?" I texted back, sounding a shade too inquisitive for a mere punter.

"She had to travel back to her home country. A relative of hers had passed away."

I was dumbfounded as to this, though not surprised at this

being the outcome, living in the environment she was, the country shattered by man's darker aspect. I thought I should follow suit, and shadow Marissa into that bomb-shattered city—a place where anxiety and fear abounded. It was time that I ended my charade and plucked up the courage to do what she herself had done. I thought that I might run into her, she mentioned to me in passing the road where her grandmother resided and ended her days.

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