

Vladimir Putin, a Russian Hamlet



by Lev Tsitrin

Perhaps unsurprisingly, to the Ukrainians Putin is a modern-day Hitler. They often [portray him split-face](#), one side being Hitler's; and they call him "Putler."

I beg to differ. I do not think that Putin's motivations are as irrational as Hitler's were, or that he is as sadistic as Hitler was. Not every conqueror is a maniac. Napoleon wasn't, nor – excepting the exceptions like Ivan the Terrible – were most Russian tsars. For me, the Hitler comparison does not work, and as I was thinking of how to explain Putin's persisting stubbornness in his war on Ukraine, my subconscious pushed into my mind a seemingly unrelated model for his behavior – Shakespeare's Hamlet. The more I compared the two,

the more alike their stories started to look.

For starters, both Putin and Hamlet are strongly motivated, and their motivator is identical – revenge. While Hamlet seeks to avenge the death of his father; Putin wants to avenge the post-Soviet loss of what is to him the core Russian land. Hamlet is prodded on by the maddening vision of his uncle pouring poison into his napping father's ear; Putin – by humiliating expulsion of his puppet, Viktor Yanukovych, during the [bloody Maidan protests of 2014](#), and by a memory of the visceral horror of death by burning of almost fifty [pro-Russian protesters in Odesa](#) in the same year.

But this is not all. Putin and Hamlet share the key character trait of those wielding unlimited power – disregard for the lives of the others. In the course of his revenge, Hamlet verbally assails his mother (who was not guilty of anything other than agreeing to marry her husband's brother after her husband's death – which is no crime) – and in the process kills Polonius, a man who was also innocent, mistaking him for the real culprit. What follows is even worse: instead of feeling remorse for his deadly error, and rethinking his revenge, Hamlet callously shrugs off this murder as no big deal (and later in the play, he signs – with equal indifference – a death warrant for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern), The killing of Polonius becomes the key pivot of the play that determines its tragic finale – because Polonius' daughter (and presumably Hamlet's beloved) Ophelia goes mad, causing her brother Laertes to swear revenge – so now, the tables of justice are turned, Hamlet himself becoming the rightful target of vengeance.

In a way, the same mistake happened in the first few days of the Ukraine invasion when Putin's plans of quick takeover ran aground because, instead of hailing him as Ukraine's liberator from the usurping, drug-addicted, pro-Western Zelensky-led bunch of stooges, the Ukrainians saw in him an imperialistic tyrant, and fought back as ferociously as if he was indeed the

second Hitler. When he saw the murder and mayhem he unintentionally unleashed, Putin should have paused to rethink his plans, stopping the butchery by withdrawing under any face-saving pretext – but instead, with callousness that equaled Hamlet's, he doubled down, ignoring the cruel suffering he caused to both Russians and Ukrainians, and proceeded to push ahead, bombing the cities into smithereens and causing tens of thousands of additional deaths. This had exactly the effect of Hamlet's killing of Polonius: while in invading Ukraine Putin sought revenge against the West, what he got was Ukrainian pledges of revenge against himself.

There is yet another similarity – Putin's and Hamlet's *modus operandi* are exactly identical: both choose self-isolation as a way of pursuing their goals and of staving off all attempts to bring them to reason and thwarting their plans. Hamlet does it by feigned madness (which works great for him, for it is impossible to talk sense into a madman); Putin – by refusing to know what the world thinks or does; he neither uses a cell phone nor accesses internet (as a fluent German speaker, he could have learned from the German, Austrian, and Swiss press the alternative view of the war). Being locked in his own world, he takes information only from the underlings who know what he wants to hear, and who massage the news that reaches him accordingly. In short, both Putin and Hamlet operate out of impenetrable mental fortress of unshakable self-righteousness.

Putin's Ukrainian adventure is far from over, but the ending of Hamlet – the destruction of his dynasty and the takeover of Danish kingdom by the neighboring Norway – should serve Putin as a cautionary tale. Many observers see China as the main beneficiary of Russia's vastly diminished military, economic, and diplomatic power which resulted from its international isolation and war losses – with Russia's far east becoming de-facto Chinese territory – or at least, its exclusive economic zone. The end of Russia as we know it, they warn, may be near.

If Putin keeps playing Hamlet as faithfully as he did so far, China will play the part of Shakespeare's Norway, China's Xi looking really well in the role of Fortinbras.

Great books explore universal themes – and the tragedy of Hamlet appears to be universal enough as a lesson of blind revenge going awry to cover something as removed from it in time, space, and culture as the Ukraine war. Time will tell how this ends, and I hope that Putin won't turn into a Hitler (or chooses to play Hamlet to the bitter end). He would be well advised to abandon his misbegotten revenge that, just like Hamlet's, ensnared too many totally innocent people and threatens his country with disintegration. Hopefully, he will order his armies back, avoiding further carnage and, ultimately, the potential Hamlet-like disaster befalling his country.

But will Putin listen? Not being connected to the world via the internet, he surely won't read this. What a shame that the lesson which one of world's greatest books – Shakespeare's Hamlet – should have taught Putin, must be wasted!