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## ДЕЯКІ ЕКЗИСТЕНЦІАЛЬНІ РЕФЛЕКСІЇ ПРО САМОВИЗНАЧЕНІСТЬ В УМОВАХ ВІЙНИ

(ОГЛЯДОВА СТАТТЯ)

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Хоча будь-яка війна є “продовженням політики іншими засобами” (К. фон Клаузевіц), російсько-українську війну проаналізовано з точки зору екзистенціалістської філософії як філософії криз людини. Російсько-українська війна актуалізує забуті екзистенціалістські ідеї вибору, ситуації, свободи, обов’язку, відповідальності в контексті індивідуального та колективного самовизначення. Розглянуто праці, які пояснюють ці ідеї, таких філософів, як Ж.-П. Сартр, А. Камю, К. Ясперс. Війна руйнує життєвий світ людини, і тому вона повинна протистояти такому руйнуванню. Війну Росії проти України розглянуто як знищення індивідуального та колективного буття України. Опір українців є спротивом цій деструкції, і цей спротив надає нового, актуального значення співіснуванню, заснованому на солідарності всіх українців. Відтак конституовано Україну як Res-Publica, тобто як “спільну справу”, “буття-у-спільному” (Ж.-Л. Нансі).

**Ключові слова:** екзистенція, філософія екзистенції, екзистенціалізм, солідарність, російсько-українська війна, свобода, вибір.

## SOME EXISTENTIAL REFLECTIONS ON SELF-DETERMINATION IN THE CONDITIONS OF THE WAR (Review Article)

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“Fighting is more important than truth”  
William Faulkner. Ad Astra

Although any war is a “continuation of politics by other means” (K. von Clausewitz), the article examines the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war from the point of view of existentialist philosophy as a philosophy of human crises. The Russian-Ukrainian war actualizes the forgotten existentialist ideas of choice, situation, freedom, duty, responsibility in the context of individual and collective self-determination. In the article such philosophers as J.-P. Sartre, A. Camus, K. Jaspers, are analysed from existentialist ideas. War destroys a person’s life world, and therefore it must resist such

**destruction. Russia's war against Ukraine is seen as the destruction of the individual and collective existence of Ukraine. The resistance of Ukrainians is resistance to this destruction, and this resistance gives a new, relevant meaning to coexistence based on the solidarity of all Ukrainians. Therefore, Ukraine is constituted as Res-Publica, i.e. as a "common cause", "being-in-common" (J.-L. Nancy).**

**Key words:** *existence, existentialism, philosophy of existence, solidarity, the Russian-Ukrainian war, freedom, choice.*

### Introduction

Existentialism, an intellectual and cultural movement in France during the Second World War and after, became a powerful reflection on the situation of an individual and nation in the conditions of war. And now we live in war – war in Ukraine. Ukraine is in Europe, so war in Europe. It is not by chance that existential reflections about war, about person at war, about the situation of a person, and about a people in the conditions of the war become actual again.

Existentialism had already been forgotten at the time our present-day war began; it did not actively continue in France or in Germany late into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As stated in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: existentialism "as a cultural movement belongs to the past" [Crowell, Summer 2020].

Why existentialism recede on the library shelf? Rise of an era of "universal and liberal well-being", a way out of the political, social, and economic crises which took place in Europe. Existentialism, as a philosophy of crises, seemingly became irrelevant. In Europe, the EU was created not only to overcome the consequences of World War II, but also so that European nations could cooperate in the economic field and forget about the enmity between themselves, especially in France and Germany. These two countries were the initiators of the creation of the EU.

Now, the full-scale Russia's war in Ukraine has once again reminded Europeans of the existential values that they have long realized and without which European civilization is impossible, i. e., self-determination, both individual and collective, freedom and democracy.

It was Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986) and J.-P. Sartre who started the direction of existentialism: for them, it was an ethical theory in which they placed freedom as the source of all other values. I also argue that freedom is the basis of self-determination and democracy. As Sartre (1929–1980) states: "...freedom is the unique foundation of values" [Sartre 1976: 38]. In time of war, the essence of a person who is a member of this or that national community, a citizen of a democratic state, is determined in relation to the war, their role in it, etc., and they do this if they are free. Thus, this article analyzes individual and collective/national existential self-determination in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war as well as re-actualizes the idea of freedom of such existentialists as J.-P. Sartre and A. Camus (1913–1960), and the idea of the "ultimate

situation" of the existential philosopher K. Jaspers (1883–1969).

### Individual self-determination in the conditions of the war

War puts everything in its place, and the event of war is what, paradoxically and radically, determines a person's choice between good and evil, rationality and stupidity, responsibility and irresponsibility, reality and illusion. The ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war has one more peculiarity: it is war of terror, even a war of genocide, because it is an attempt by Russians<sup>1</sup> to destroy Ukrainians. Remember the atrocities of the Russian army in Irpen, Bucha, Borodyanka, Mariupol, and other towns, villages, and cities of Ukraine, which were forcefully destroyed by the Russian army.

War is the "ultimate situation" (Jaspers)<sup>1</sup>, a situation that requires a special individual to take a special action or actions that define him or her in this war situation. Here, for example, a young or a mature man in Kyiv was awakened by bombs exploding at 4 a. m. on February 24, 2022. His first reaction was, "this is war!". With little hesitation he called his relatives to ask if they were alright and to tell them he was going to the Military Commissariat to go to war "right now". His decision was immediate and unequivocal. There were many such men in Kyiv on the morning of February 24, 2022. There were queues to Military Commissariats throughout the country because everyone wanted to defend Ukraine. Such determination to defend freedom can also be considered taking responsibility for what is happening and taking responsibility for oneself in that context. Thus, it is not true that if war "makes a person unthinkable", that war halts thinking. Realizing that you are at war and that war is here and now is an act of self-reflection that creates responsibility.

This would not have happened if Russia had not invaded Ukraine. We, humans, live in relatively

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<sup>1</sup> "Ultimate situation" is one of the central concepts of Karl Jaspers in particular and existentialism in general. This is how Karl Jaspers explains what an ultimate situation is: "...there are situations which remain essentially the same even if their momentary aspect changes and their shattering force is obscured: I must die, I must suffer, I must struggle, I am subject to chance, I involve myself inexorably in guilt. We call these fundamental situations of our existence ultimate situations. That is to say, they are situations which we cannot evade or change" [Jaspers 2003:19-20].

determined situations. That is, we always see ourselves in some situations, which can change; opportunities can also change, and when opportunities are not used, they disappear. We can also influence a situation by making particular efforts; however, there are particular situations, for example, war, death, accidents, etc., when regardless of the efforts made, we can change them only in appearance. It is these situations that life creates for us, that are “ultimate situations”. We cannot significantly influence them or simply survive them. And so, thanks to the awareness of their inevitability and recognition of their existence, a person achieves the renewal of their nature, achieves worldview transformations, and rethinks the meaning of life. These are the situations and events that divide human life into “before” and “after”; these are the situations that radically change a person – a person becomes completely different; they had no idea they were capable of such a thing; in this case, to go to war and fight. An “ultimate situation” helps a person to truly understand their situation and answer the question “who am I?”. This is very important: self-determination during a war is individual, which means the formation of a truly self-aware individual who, answering the question “who am I?”, says: “That with I am is freedom.”

An example from Sartre’s work “Existentialism is Humanism” is relevant. In this instance, the philosopher relates a story about a boy who is faced with a difficult choice: to go defend his homeland from invaders or to stay with his mother as her only support. That is, he must choose between the struggle against invaders and the helping his mother at home. There is no morality here to help make a choice. A difficult question arises from the point of view of Christianity because faith teaches love one’s neighbor, but who is closer here – your mother or the liberation of your country which also means your mother’s freedom. A person can ask for advice, but the answer will depend on the adviser’s position. That is also a choice: who to ask is an independent choice of a person [Sartre 2007: 30-31].

Still, there is no choice without responsibility, especially when war is raging. Sartre expresses himself interestingly when he says: “And when we say that man takes responsibility for himself, we say more than that – he is in his choices responsible for all men...” [Sartre 2007: 24]. This means that each of our actions is a creative act that determines goodness, and impacts others. Yet, goodness is not objective and universal although that which we choose in our minds is “right” for everyone around us. Of course, a person can try to deny it, or refuse it. However, by determining what is desirable for oneself, one determines the goodness for all humanity. So, Ukrainian men and women who consciously choose to fight against the Russian invader

determine the benefit of peace for the rest of the world through their struggle.

The idea of freedom of choice, which is directly related to responsibility for the choice, was one of the central concepts in the work and life problem of J.-P. Sartre, a French philosopher who supported the independence of Algeria, supported the Cuban revolution and participated in the events of May 1968, i. e. repeatedly spoke about the right of peoples to freedom.

In 1943, Sartre’s work “Being and Nothingness” was published, in which the author describes freedom as something absolute; humans are doomed to it – condemned to be free: “Human freedom precedes essence in man and makes it possible; the essence of the human being is suspended in his freedom. What we call freedom is impossible to distinguish from the being of “human reality”. Man does not exist first to be free subsequently; there is no difference between the being of man and his being-free” [Sartre 1976: 25]. Sartre conceives freedom not as freedom of spirit or as freedom of will, but as freedom of choice, which no one can take away from a person. For example, even a prisoner is free to decide to accept the sentence given or to fight for freedom, and what will happen is no longer up to him. Any person can go to war and choose to fight the enemy, even if they did not train to be a soldier. There are a lot of such cases in Ukraine after February 24, 2022: peaceful people, civilians who have never practiced shooting or other military affairs, singers, programmers, entrepreneurs, students, and even professors chose war and went to fight. Freedom is the “foundation of foundations”, the roots of any choice.

In the book “Being and Nothingness”, which was written and published during the stormy years of World War II, Sartre says that “the artillery preparation which precedes the attack can provoke fear in the soldier who undergoes the bombardment, but anguish is born in him when he tries to foresee the conduct with which he will face the bombardment, when he asks himself if he is going to be able to “hold up”. Similarly, the recruit who reports for active duty at the beginning of the war can in some instances be afraid of death, but more often he is “afraid of being afraid”; that is, he is filled with anguish before himself. Most of the time dangerous or threatening situations present themselves in facets; they will be apprehended through a feeling of fear or of anguish according to whether we envisage the situation as acting on the man or the man as acting on the situation” [Sartre 1976: 29]. So it is, because a person finds themselves in an unusual situation, in which they have never been before; and this non-occurrence (never) in these war situations causes fear and anxiety. Later, they may feel the excitement from the struggle they will

lead and they will no longer be disturbed by the enemy's bombardment or shooting. In a word, they will not be disturbed or frightened by the "nothing" of the enemy.

Freedom is not obvious; it always reveals itself in choice and only in choice. Not making a choice is an act of freedom, then freedom remains only an empty word, an abstraction detached from a concrete individual. Thus, humans are thrown into war and they must live with war: "the existentialist could accept the proposition that war is something that happens to man, and the individual, thrown into war, must simply decide how to live within it" [Moseley 2003: 54-55].

Behind the awareness of the duty to make a choice, acceptance of its weight and responsibility for what one will do in the situation that life has created for one, lies the individuality of experiences, the fact that everyone must understand the weight of their actions, choices, and thoughts. Freedom becomes an empirical concept, tangible for those who fight. This is how thirty-three-year-old Taras, a former English teacher and a military man since 2014, speaks about freedom: "My generation did not know the price of freedom. Now we know. And this should be handed down as a legacy, so that in the future our freedom is not allowed to be encroached upon and, even more so, not to be lost" [Barsukova July 8, 2022].

Here it is worth considering the work of another philosopher of the times of the world wars, namely: A. Camus. Most of his works were written during the Second World War or in the post-war years, which can explain the author's choice of topics for coverage and exactly how he does it. The parable novel "Plague" [Camus 2021] was written in 1941–1943 and published only in 1947 for the first time; these dates already hint at the theme and hidden meaning. The name is an allusion to Nazism, as there is the concept of the "brown plague" – its second name. Plague here is not a disease – it is the personification of metaphysical evil, injustice, killings of civilians, mass shooting, cruel sentences and war.

The central idea of the novel is the fight against death. This book is not about a cry of despair, but about those who do not give up in the face of death. The meaning of my existence is to resist death and fight for life. War is death, and if I choose to initiate war, then I stand on the side of death, and if I choose to fight death, engaging in war, with those who attacked my motherland, then I choose to fight for life. Every human being has a duty to fight for life, to help those who are fighting for life. Thus, once again, Ukrainian men and women fight for life, for the preservation of life, because the Russian army, which is the manifestation of "the Russian world", brings death, devastation, and destruction of life.

### **Collective self-determination in the conditions of the war**

So it is now clear what happens to the individual when they are confronted with the spontaneity of war; they still need to make a choice, a choice that will affect not only themselves but also all those who are and even far from them.

And what will happen to a whole nation/people of such individuals? They unite into one whole, overcoming various divisions that existed during peaceful life, i. e. political, economic, religious, etc. It can even be said that this Russian-Ukrainian war created the Ukrainian Republic, that it revealed the meaning of Ukraine's existence as a *Res-Publica* – a joint cause of protecting and preserving the freedom and independence of Ukrainians. A historian, a writer, and a museum worker, N. Rozlutsyi puts: "Thousands of historians, writers, accountants, bankers, IT specialists, teachers, designers, and other completely peaceful professions are now in Ukraine under fire, in the trenches, on the front lines. They are being killed from the 152 mm howitzer shells and missiles "Tochka-U", bullets, cluster and phosphorous ammunition are coming at them. Some of them have already died. And someone will never return to their profession because they are burned out. But they all continue to fight. Because Ukraine is behind them. Because, if they lay down their arms, their parents will be killed, their wives and daughters raped, and their homes destroyed or confiscated" [Bobkova 01.06.2022].

So, common people, citizens of Ukraine, are at war. Russian troops shell their houses, neighborhoods, high-rise buildings, Russian tanks, and artillery raze Ukrainian towns and villages to the ground, and Russian soldiers loot, shoot men at point-blank range, rape women, and then kill them, shoot cars with whole families in them, as well as evacuation buses and ambulances. Those who fight against the Russian invasion are no longer just "the population", but participants in a great event in which the existence of Ukraine, as a nation, as a republic, takes place. Thus, the Russian-Ukrainian war is existential, not just for the territory, but for the existence of Ukraine in its integral essence: political, historical, and cultural. We see how Ukrainians defend their collective existence, demonstrating every day of the war "the tragic beauty of mutual aid, solidarity, volunteerism" (A. Akhutin). It is undeniable that the war needs the solidarity of people who before the war we're engaged in their private affairs, and "lived their lives". But war awakens the self-awareness of society as a *Res-Publica*, as an existential collective whole. The defense of Ukraine becomes a common matter for millions of Ukrainians. Propaganda clichés about "brotherly nations", political demagoguery, and

political divisions are disappearing. Instead of such clichés and pseudo-divisions, Ukraine emerges as *Res-Publica*.

Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine actualizes the concept of *being-in-common* (l'être-en-commun) by J.-L. Nancy (1940–2021), which can be considered – as a developed and deepened concept of *Mitsein* by M. Heidegger (1989–1976). The concept of *being-in-common* can be considered as the analogue of the concept of *Res-Publica*.

Russia's war in Ukraine destroys *being-in-common* through the violence, assimilation, and devastation of the lands it conquers. The Russian Empire is special in this kind of destruction of entire peoples and ethnic groups through expansion. Arnold Toynbee (1889–1975) noted that to assess the development of civilization, it is worth looking at where it originated and to what extent it managed to spread [Toynbee 1935: 184]. Here, instead of the word civilization, the word “empire” may be used. An empire only exists when it conquers other lands and absorbs entire nations. This is exactly the kind of empire Russia is in the 21st century, and it must be reckoned with. The empire is a transitory variety of languages, cultures, and traditions that gradually disappear into one dominant one. So “the plural is not important in itself, it is merely a transition to unity, the totality of the one. Equally exploitative and unjust, as we could see, was the proclaimed plurality of the communist regime, which was supposed to be – to quote Stalin – plural/“national” in terms of form but strictly unitary in terms of the communist content” Nancy, Schuback 2013: 6]. In the case of the actual Russian Empire, the diversity of identities is on the other side of the “the Russian World”<sup>2</sup>. “The Russian World” is homogeneous and exists outside the boundaries of any national and ethnic communities. If you are a Buryat, then you must be a “Russian Buryat”; if an Abkhazian, then you must be a “Russian Abkhazian” etc. Neither the Buryat language nor culture is important for the “Russian world”; in general, nothing Buryat matters, as well as Ukrainian, Abkhazian, Lithuanian, Polish, Estonian and so on. Thus “the Russian World” that comes to the occupied territories devastates them culturally and spiritually. “The Russian World” becomes one total whole. Relying on past experiences of the USSR and the Tsar Russian Empire. Ukrainians understand this, so they unite, overcoming various pre-war divisions (political, religious, etc.) in order not to allow “the Russian World” to conquer their lands.

<sup>2</sup> The doctrine of “the Russian World” was created by the son of the founder of the “methodological school” G. Shchedrovitskyi (1929–1994), P. Shchedrovitskyi (b. 1958). See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian\\_world](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_world).

One cannot agree with B. Anderson (1936–2015) that *Res-Publica*, as a community/nation, is imaginary, because, according to him, the members of the community will never know each other, will not have direct relations with each other, but will only imagine them [Anderson 2004]. The war in Ukraine brought Ukrainians extremely close, regardless of where they lived and live, whether in the north of Ukraine, in the west of Ukraine, in the east of Ukraine, or the south of Ukraine. Many internally displaced people in Ukraine ended up in other regions, but they were welcomed there as relatives. The Republic of Ukraine, as a common matter of all Ukrainians, is “We” that is based on important social feelings of sympathy, friendship, love, and trust. Today, every Ukrainian says it is “We”, which opposes “the Russian World”. Being together (“We”) acquires a new meaning for Ukrainians; it's not just being together as a simple arithmetic sum, but more effectively communicating and responding to the requests of others in trouble. “Such a “We” as constituted by the relations of “With” – “neither mediate nor immediate”, “the closeness, the brushing up against or the coming across, the almost there of distanced proximity”; such a “we” that is only constituted by its space and maybe also by the chance of “coming across”” [Nancy, Schuback 2013: 10].

### Conclusions

Ukrainians met the emptiness of “the Russian World” directly, as Europe and the world met it indirectly through reports from the destroyed cities, towns, and villages of Ukraine, through photographs of peaceful Ukrainians, shot and killed. Chechens, Georgians, and Syrians have already experienced this “Russian emptiness”: emptiness against peace (the world), emptiness against life (existence). This is a new reality in which we have had to live – the reality of “the Russian World”, which brings emptiness as *modus vivendi*.

The Russia's war against Ukraine is not an ideological war (for example, confrontation between Nazism and Communism), it is a war that wants to transform Ukrainians and Ukraine as nation into emptiness. Putin believes that Ukraine does not exist, there is no such state and country [Putin wrote an article about Ukraine 07/12/2021]. Thus, Russia is waging a nihilistic war with Ukrainians who exist. Russia denies the existence of Ukrainians and Ukraine, so who Russians and Russia fighting against? Against the world in particular, against the peace in general. As the consequence, this war is not a war between nations. It is a war between existence and emptiness, so it is a *metaphysical war*. Who will win? Existence or

emptiness? A living peace or emptiness? This war concerns not only Ukrainians, who are defending their existence on a local, physical level, but also the whole world, all peoples and nations because emptiness denies the existence of one of the peoples of this world. Ukrainians show the meaning of the existence of all nations and peoples of the world by their struggle against emptiness (“the Russian World”). Ukrainians protect peace and the world as they can. They want a dignified existence, protecting the world from the emptiness. And here we touch on the very beginnings of existence. We understand them because they are clear as day to us, now.

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