

Sons of Gustaf

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From the balcony of my 15th floor hotel room high above Yalta's coast I could monitor ships on the Black Sea, peer down at harbor doings and, turning north, feast my eyes upon the snow-draped granite peaks of the Crimean Mountains. Rising majestically above the basin, the lofty crags were a jumble of edges and angles that dropped precipitously into the sea as if under an unstoppable momentum. Nestled in a spruce forest just below the snow-line was an Orthodox cathedral. Its single gold dome glinted smoothly above the conifers.

Floor-to-ceiling windows dominated one wall of my room, and a sliding glass door opened onto the balcony. Pleasure craft crisscrossed the marina this morning, and fishermen trawled away from harbor moorings. Further out, cargo vessels sorted themselves into the shipping lanes. The Black Sea constantly drew my eye, even in the middle of the night. Whenever I got up, I padded over to the curtains to sneak a peek. The beacon of the Yalta lighthouse swept the bay and rocky shore with an amber beam.

At 3 a.m. a snowstorm raged fiercely down from the mountains, and I crept out onto the balcony to have a look. A weave of flakes etched the pitch black of night with a dynamic cross-hatch pattern. A burst of snow swarmed, almost insect-like in intensity, the way bees guarding a hive do. Before climbing back into bed I opened the

curtains all the way, and rearranged the pillows so that I could lie with my head at the foot of the mattress and my feet the other way around, the better to watch this festival of silvery white.

By dawn, Yalta had no accumulation at all, just a wet emerald shimmer on its rows of coastal vineyards and its groves of almond trees. Barefoot on the balcony, I breathed in the soft dampness. Unless someone had peered out at 3 a.m., as I had, they would not even know that snow had fallen last night.

The mountains to the east, mantled under a fresh patina of white, gleamed importantly in the morning light.

A botanical park and wildlife refuge stood between my hotel and Yalta. Its 100 acres were a well-curated reserve of orchids and winding walkways, a habitat for shore birds, too. Fronds of palm trees rustled amid cypress spires. The cement shell of a partially constructed high-rise hotel stood a half mile across the park from me. Its someday-guests would have a sweeping view of the Black Sea from their own spacious balconies, just as I had from mine, but for now construction had fizzled. Economic sanctions had targeted tourist development in Crimea, and the sanctions had cratered the hospitality industry especially.

Dull concrete ribs of another resort-hotel in-the-making contrasted with the glade of spreading yews in which the building stood. The walls defined suite-sized spaces—pod-like and modular—that stood open to the elements, unfinished. Roughed-in frames for windows and sliding glass doors were still months away from any kind of refinement that would prepare them to receive an actual installation of windows or doors. Stalled at mid-resort like this, the structure and others like it gave Yalta a war-zone look—as if the enemy had blitzed the place overnight. As if in some parallel universe, while the darkness beyond my balcony swarmed through the wee hours with its mirage of fluffy white snow, enemy drones had landed surgical strikes.

Sparks lit up the interior of the half-built hotel's upper floor. I traced the source to a welder's arc. It flared and sputtered intermittently. Skeletal crews were obviously performing a certain level of rock-bottom construction onsite these days, even if gung-ho shovel-ready work had slowed to a crawl. As the welder's sparks died away, the concrete pod of the hollowed out suite lapsed once more into moody cement shadows. Its empty sockets stared back at me.

When economic sanctions sealed the Crimean Peninsula off from prosperity, this emptiness was the look the place acquired, this hollowness too.

The first sanctions in 2014 targeted Russian oligarchs and pro-Kremlin commerce on the mainland, freezing bank accounts and thwarting global travel. The U.S. and the European Union imposed those sanctions in tandem as a way to express outrage over Russia's annexation of Crimea. Since 2014, the EU had continued to review its original sanctions and then vote on whether or not to renew them. Every six months it had voted to renew.

The U.S. had taken matters a step further, torquing the financial blockade more tightly with long-range tactical sanctions that were precision honed to make certain Crimea itself uniquely felt the heat. Oligarchs and their assets were no longer critical hits, in other words. Now that the Russian business sector had begun to invest in Crimea's tourism, destroying those investments took on a greater strategic urgency.

Standing on the balcony, I focused my gaze across the botanical park and in one panoramic sweep took in this skyline of high-rise half-built exoskeletons. If I were to snap pictures in black and white and then apply a grainy filter, the scene would be reminiscent of battlefield photojournalism. Yalta would resemble a bombed out city in the midst of a war whose outcome had not resolved.

Yalta was a bombed out city.

The outcome had not yet resolved.

Because of the sanctions, my friend Tatyana had said.

She and I were on our way to Sevastopol yesterday, Hero City of the Great Patriotic War (known in the West as World War II,) and we were driving along Yalta's winding coast. The first thing she'd pointed out were in fact the hulls and husks of unfinished hotels like these. She'd gestured toward one of them, a concrete carapace with sunken-looking window holes. "You're probably wondering, right?" She made eye contact with me and gave a slight smile. "You're probably wondering what's going on."

Her demeanor was apologetic—the way someone would act if guests dropped by unexpectedly and found the house not quite in order, not quite picked up and put together. When an unexpected guest popped in on a bright day after winter's ceaseless drear, the cobwebs became so suddenly noticeable and the dust bunnies so all at once hard to ignore. Unexpected guests made those things obvious.

I was that unexpected guest.

Peering through the car's windshield, I realized there was no way to disguise how crippling this economic attack on Crimea had been.

In an era of hybrid warfare, sanctions replaced a boots-on-the-ground full-scale troop invasion. Combat belligerents would never have to set foot here in order to drive this place to its knees. The financial blockade was a Special Ops Force all its own. Trace the distinct shape of the little Black Sea peninsula, its physical outline on a literal map of the world, and you'd have traced the shape of the embargo. You'd have demarcated the actual battlefield.

An encirclement was underway.

As Tatyana and I drove toward Sevastopol, I got pretty good at picking out various targets: multi-story units of raw reinforced cement—unclad, unready, unprofitable. The sanctions were a “clean hands” style of warfare, weaponized for bloodless attack—hegemony in practical application. Former U.S. president Woodrow Wilson, a post-World War I adopter of sanctions, had praised them for their “peaceful, silent and deadly” qualities. Soldiers never had to get close enough to the enemy to see the whites of his eyes, never had to smell his breath or pillage his pathetically garrisoned village, take prisoners and then figure out what to do with those prisoners, or divvy up the spoils.

Blue-chip lenders now divvied up the spoils under the august glow of their green-shaded lamps, whether sitting in a bricks-and-mortar establishment on Wall Street in lower Manhattan or in the Quartier Nord in Brussels, and they did so with the effectiveness of an automatic currency-counter sorting a hopper of loose bills.

Financial monoliths like PayPal, MasterCard, Visa and ebay pulled their operational capacity from Crimea under pressure from the U.S. in 2015. Expedia, TripAdvisor and Booking.com quickly followed suit. For a place that relied so heavily on tourism, this was especially devastating. Eventually only the credit cards issued by Russian Federation banks would work in Crimea, although credit cards drawn on European and American banks would still function normally all over mainland Russia—Moscow, Saint Petersburg, you name it.

When I sat in the U.S., planning my trip here, I constantly received the message “No Rooms Available” from reservation sites for every Yalta hotel I tried, regardless of

the dates I typed in, regardless of the fact that I was trying to make arrangements for a trip in January—and it was only November at the time.

Crimea was a big bull's-eye on the Black Sea's sub-tropical coast. Its ports had once welcomed European cruise liners full of tourists. Its marinas had once bustled with yachts and corsairs. But no more.

Crimea was now frontline cannon fodder.

After Tatyana and I parked near Sevastopol's main promenade yesterday, she played hostess to the city's historical sites and markers, its equestrian statues and monuments, and we walked around a plaza named for Admiral Nakhimov, the premier naval hero of the Crimean War, circa 1857. A cadre of youthful cadets went through their changing-of-the-guard motions before the Eternal Flame, an austere granite and bronze memorial which honored Sevastopol's courage and sacrifice during the Great Patriotic War. The fortress city had held the Nazis off for 377 days. Its Defenders utilized entrenchment and also deployed artillery in underground citadels. They stationed pill boxes in coastal caves kitted out with gun barrels for repelling airstrikes and amphibious landings. The Wehrmacht dropped 20,000 tons of ordnance on Sevastopol in June 1942 alone, an assault more relentless than what London faced in the Blitz or even Warsaw. While Tatyana and I stood beside the Eternal Flame, the cadets snapped through their steps with precision, rifles knocked back against their left shoulders, bodies stiffly rigid as they moved, chinstraps tight under their lower lips, eyes focused on a point in the middle distance.

Gusts of wind swept through the main square and made the fire-tips of the eternal flame leap. Tatyana brushed a few strands of hair away from her forehead. "It's always windy in Sevastopol," she told me.

She pointed across the way to an ornate three-story building with deep upper-floor porches in the Moorish style and heavy fenestrations, a sturdy architectural behemoth whose cream-colored stucco walls were festooned here and there with bright coral highlights. Its windows overlooked Sevastopol harbor. Hanging beneath one of the building's stone arches, the flag of the Black Sea Naval Fleet flew prominently side by side with the Russian Federation tri-color.

"That's where Tolstoy lived," Tatyana said. "He wrote his Sevastopol Sketches from the upper floor." A Saint Petersburg newspaper had hired him as a battlefield correspondent during the Crimean War. The first-hand experience allowed Tolstoy to

write so memorably and convincingly about combat many years later in his epic *War & Peace*.

Most of Sevastopol had been levelled under Nazi bombardment in 1941. “95% destroyed,” Tatyana said. “Practically all of the buildings. But not that one.” She nodded toward the harbor and Tolstoy’s cream-stucco structure. “It’s one of Sevastopol’s 11 original buildings.”

The Nazis had unleashed the Heavy Gustaf on the city. It was the largest artillery piece ever used in combat, an absurdity of steel and ingenuity. If ever a killing machine represented the bizarre human madness of warfare, it was the Heavy Gustaf. Forty thousand pounds of iron ore went into its forging—and at a cost of 7 million Reichsmarks to the German wartime economy. In order to ship the thing to Crimea the Wehrmacht had to dismantle it and load its pieces into 25 different trains. Once the trains hauled the parts to Crimea, reassembly took a squad of 3800 men a month’s time. The Gustaf weighed so much, once outfitted with its gun barrel, it required double parallel rails for maneuvering, which meant that hundreds of technicians and personnel had to lay a second set of train tracks for moving the thing around. In battle, the Gustaf necessitated a crew of 250 soldiers and 75 engineers just to fire it. Its projectile topped out at 80 cm, a horrifying caliber, 31.5 inches in diameter.

The Nazi bombardment was so intense and so sustained, Tatyana explained to me, that residents of Sevastopol were still to this day digging up shrapnel and unearthing metal shreds when they turned the soil for their backyard gardens.

“Can you imagine--? 100 kilograms of steel fragments,” Tatyana said. “Even from one square meter.” She angled her hands out, framing for me the dimensions of the chunk of soil. “Think of it. People trying to plant a row of parsnips behind their houses.”

I remembered the trouble I’d had when attempting to convert a promising stretch of my own yard to a vegetable garden. Every time I sank my spade into the ground I hit gravel. The prior homeowner had had a parking area there. Carpeted with lawn, it had looked deceptively soil-rich and fertile. Not until I began to dig did I realize that 12 inches or so of crushed limestone lay buried there—more gravel than soil really.

I looked at the landscaped areas encircling Sevastopol’s eternal flame. I looked at the bedding plants and shrubs bordering the equestrian statues where Tatyana and I

stood. On the surface everything looked well-designed, well-put together, aesthetically pleasing, botanically balanced, tidy. Seventy-five years had passed, after all. The Soviets had driven the Nazis out of Crimea by 1944, and Sevastopol claimed its well-earned place in the history books as a Hero City. At depth, however, evidence of bombardment remained, unstirred, undisturbed, four inches down, eight inches down, a soil record of warfare's hidden aftermath. And hidden labor.

Any gardener knew how frequently, year after year, odd buried items began to leach upward in a well-worked backyard plot. Subtle pressures and percolations within the soil—frost heave and thawing—sorted things up over time as if washing them to the surface, especially moving them up through a friable loamy soft layer like a garden patch. In formerly glaciated areas, for instance, granite cobbles were common. A new specimen or two would appear each year, a stone messenger from geo-history. Other places saw broken glass leach up occasionally—for me once a rusted pistol handle in the midst of planting a row of snow peas.

I thought about a concussive force so piercingly atomizing, so blastingly fierce to drive shrapnel down into Sevastopol. I thought about the grit—copper, lead and mercury—so minutely pulverized, so explosively milled, like metal flour, power-injected into the ground in an eye-blink. Constantly exploding ordnance would produce clouds of dust, splintered glass, shockwaves of shattered cement and the acrid stench of Cordite.

The Heavy Gustaf had landed 48 shells on Sevastopol.

Its collateral damage had never ended.

A neighbor told me to use a series of screens as a means of removing the gravel from my garden plot, a way to sort and sift out the crushed limestone. A similar approach would of course work here, but it had been an unforgiving process when I tried it back home, slow to yield results, arduous, too. Imagine pressing dry clods of soil against the screen's mesh, scraping and scraping, and then shaking the screen, shaking it, sieving everything down—spadeful after spadeful. Imagine finding not the simple white stone I had but the dull scurf of metal slivers commingled with black earth, shredded testimony to the bizarre human madness that overtook us during times of war.

During times of war.

From the 15th floor balcony of my Yalta hotel I surveyed a landscape of half-built structures—weight-bearing walls that had no weight to bear yet, if ever; a resort’s rooftop bar area which had only a fringe of rusted rebar tangling up from its roofless concrete slabs. Hybrid warfare had rendered the sheer heft of a Heavy Gustaf obsolete, its literal iron ore tonnage unfeasible.

We had the sons of Gustaf now.

Peaceful, silent and deadly. Woodrow Wilson would admire finesse instruments of financial combat like our 21st Century sanctions. He would extol the potential for massive impact, the precision, the lethality. Like a currency-counter riffling through that stack of banknotes—sorting, orienting, detecting counterfeits—the sons of Gustaf could quietly brutalize Crimea. They would do so with whisper accuracy.

So peaceful, so silent, so deadly. Someone standing on a balcony like this would not hear the bombs drop, not see the bodies fall.