

Maxim Osipov
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Two months ago, when I was invited to give a Cleveringa lecture, along with gratefulness I experienced other emotions — a mixture of timidity and surprise. I am neither a dissident nor in fact even political activist. I am a Russian writer. Until recently I was also a practicing physician, a cardiologist, a founder of a small, but still functioning charity fund, and, before that, a medical publisher, as well as the author and editor of numerous scientific books. In the beginning of March this year, soon after my country launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, I had to leave Russia — out of a sense of suffocation, anger, and disgust, and due to my unwillingness to live in a totalitarian state. Now I am teaching Russian literature at Leiden University — the *alma mater* of Rudolph Cleveringa, a man righteous among the nations about whom, I must confess, I knew nothing.

I grew even more surprised when I read a speech of Rudolph Cleveringa himself — one that he made on the 26th of November 1940 and which led him into Nazi prison. I expected some denunciations similar to Émile Zola's "J'Accuse...!" or, for example, to Georgi Dimitrov's words during his trial in Leipzig, but instead I read the calm, reasoned speech of a law professor. He speaks of the Nazis with well-judged squeamishness: "Nor shall I with my words try to direct your thoughts towards those people who were the originators of this letter, the contents of which I have reported to you. Their very act speaks for itself." However, it is easy to guess how Cleveringa feels about the occupiers: "I said I would not speak of my feelings; I will keep to this promise, although they threaten to spill like molten lava through all the fissures which I at times have the feeling, could open up in my head and in my heart, under their pressure." Instead of talking about his feelings, he turns to the law: "In accordance with Dutch traditions the Constitution declares that every Dutch person is eligible to be appointed to any service of his country and to hold any rank and any office, and affords him, irrespective of his religion, the enjoyment of the same civil and citizen rights."

Why are these simple words so powerful that now, 82 years after they were spoken, we are gathered in this hall to honour their author? The answer, I think, is clear: because Rudolph Cleveringa is one of those who saved the honor of the nation to which he belonged. I asked Dutch historians about the attitude of society, about the feelings the Dutch had during the occupation of 1940 to 1945. The prevailing sentiment, they said, was dishonor — the same feeling I now feel about my own country, although morally the situation of anti-war Russians is even more difficult: our country, Russia, is not a victim of war, but an aggressor, and if were to look for historical comparisons the closest would of course be Germany in the beginning of the 1940s.

Nightmare, bad dream — that was my and my friends' first reaction to the war. How could it happen? When did it start? One of the first things I remember about Putin was his answer to a question Larry King posed about the submarine Kursk: "What happened with the submarine?" "It sank", said Putin and smiled. This was in August 2000. The last thing that I saw while leaving Moscow was a billboard that read "We Are Not Ashamed" — something unbelievable, unimaginable, totally different from the true Russian culture and spirit, as we understood them. We were not aware at that time about the thousands of war crimes the Russian army was about to commit in Ukraine. So this slogan and Putin's disgusting smile are the most expressive symbols of his rule over the past 22 years. Think of the horrors this utterly mediocre person has brought to tens of millions

of people. To Ukrainians first and foremost. But think of the damage he has done to Russians, too — in some cases ruining their minds, and in others, like ours, their entire lives.

Blaming Putin alone, however, would be unfair. Despite the fact that he is undoubtedly the main corrupter of the Russian nation, the seeds sown by him fell on fertile soil. In both Soviet and post-Soviet times, the Russian people suffered from two mental complexes at once — a superiority complex that gave them the sense that they were a nation chosen by God, along with a complex of inferiority. I see in this the deep provinciality of Russian society, since I often found this combination in rural people of all nations: on the one hand, we do not know much, we do not see much, but, on the other hand, we know something that you, urban folk, are unable to imagine. Throughout Russian history, periods of peace and prosperity were very short. Russian society has always been internally prepared for a catastrophe: each generation of Russians experienced its own catastrophe. As a result, Russia has not become what it should have become — one of the countries of Eastern Europe, albeit very large, but still — one of the countries. We can say that Russia has not survived the 20th century, a fact that can be proven even statistically: at its beginning citizens of the Russian empire made up 10% of the world's population, now Russians make up less than 2%, and the war that Russia wages against independent Ukraine will only accelerate Russia's degradation and disintegration.

As for the people of my circle, already in 2014, after Russia's annexation of Crimea, we felt like losers — historically and spiritually. Here is a metaphor I used then, on March 11, 2014, soon after Russia's invasion, to describe the situation in which we found ourselves:

It's like a heart attack. The patient is hooked up to the monitor, hoping that the machine's monotonous beeping will tell him something, anything. All he can think about are household chores, little errands, and the physical wellbeing of his loved ones. Can't read, can't listen to his favorite music – not because of the pain (there's no more pain), but because books and music belong to the past, while the present... It's as if there is no present. There's only the beeping of the monitor, the other patients, who are just as confused as he is, and the sense that life will likely go on, but that it won't be the same. Life will be different. But in what way?

Now many of us have had to emigrate, to flee the country where we were born, grew up, raised our children, lived to see our grandchildren born, and began to grow old; to leave behind our homes and friends, and the graves of our parents. We hate war, hate the one who unleashed it, but we also weren't planning to abandon our homeland (motherland, fatherland) — every word, whichever you choose, starting with whichever letter, capital or lowercase, feels dirty, dishonored. Some say that when you lose, you learn your true worth. Soon we will learn — because that's what we are, losers.

Being an émigré is not an honorable distinction, and there is also no honor in remaining in a country that can rightly be called fascist, keeping a low profile. I'd like to exploit yet another metaphor, suggested by a good friend of mine. Imagine that you are sitting in a train, and a gang of thugs, hooligans, enters your car and starts terrorizing the passengers. One group of people moves to another car, a bigger group stays with their eyes down, pretending not to see the atrocities going on around them. From the ethical point of view these two groups are in a similar position. But there is a very small number

of people who try to fight off the bullies, even if this fight is doomed to fail. Those people, rather than me, deserve to represent Russia here and elsewhere: they are unable to crush Putin's regime, but they try to save the nation's honor, if there is something yet to be saved. These people deserve to be named, each of them, but I will mention just a few: Alexei Gorinov, Ilya Yashin, Vladimir Kara-Murza, Evgeny Roizman, Yuri Dmitriev, and, of course, the first name to be mentioned is that of Alexei Navalny. Therefore, I would like to devote a part of my speech to him. Let me cite some quotes from an essay on this exceptionally brave man that I wrote in April 2021.

On April 22, 2021, when Navalny had already been imprisoned I wrote the following short essay, which has been published in Dutch by *Van Oorschot Publishing House* in a collection dedicated to Navalny. Let me quote some passages:

On January 13, 2021, when I learned that Alexei Navalny intended to return to Moscow, I posted the following to my Facebook page: "Once, at the circus, I saw a highwire act. The orchestra fell silent, and the audience did too. High up above our heads, a teenage boy was making his way along a nearly invisible tightrope. I was so afraid for him that I grew dizzy. And then a child's voice burst through the silence: "Good boy! Hold on!" Today's news inspired the same sense of dizziness, as well as the urge to shout like that child."

In those January days, our admiration for Navalny — who had only recently, miraculously, recovered from poisoning — outweighed our fear for him. He knew what he was doing. Or so it seemed. We compared him to Napoleon on the bridge of Arcole, to Ivan, the lucky fool of Russian fairy tales, even to Pushkin's Pretender ("Providence watches him, of course; / Well then, my friends, we'll not be downcast either"). Simply put, we saw him as a chosen man, a person endowed with a sense of destiny. This feeling was only intensified when, upon arriving at Sheremetyevo, Navalny selected the ideal background (a wall-size photograph depicting the towers and domes of the Kremlin) for an interview — his final interview while still at liberty.

Navalny's lightness and wit, his gift for improvisation, were unprecedented and shone most brightly in his famous conversation with one of his poisoners, which reached millions of Internet users. Many of us still remember the German aviator Mathias Rust landing near Red Square on the evening of May 28, 1987. Navalny's conversation with the hapless chemist gave rise to the same sensation we experienced then, 33 years ago: life will be different, the barriers are sure to collapse, the window has opened a crack and cannot be slammed shut. The terrible, almighty "Organs of State Security" have been placed in a funny, ridiculous light. Actors of enormous masculine charisma — so it seemed — will no longer play spies in the movies, and those pimply boys who line up for FSB academies might also think twice.

"Why won't the judge show herself — what is she, naked?" Navalny asks in court. Imagine the presence of mind it takes to joke under those circumstances. And then his final exclamation: "Russia will be happy!" — a cheerful phrase in place of the far darker, albeit accurate, slogans of previous years.

Heroism as a gift, as a form of genius that cannot be faked or imitated — this is what elicits such admiration from one segment of the population and such envy

from another... Now the cheerfulness has evaporated, ceding way to profound despair. Navalny is in prison, being tortured with sleep deprivation, refused medical assistance. Every day brings darker, more depressing news. The political world has turned black and white. It's pointless to reason in terms of right vs. left, parliamentary vs. presidential republic, nation state vs. empire. The nature of the conflict is plain as day: life vs. its absence, light vs. darkness. Society has been plunged into a state of moral catastrophe, of impotence, once again especially pronounced among men. Neither immersion in our work, nor retreat into our private lives, nor emigration can save us... You see Russian life shrinking, growing faint. First one, then another decides to leave: but how will that help Navalny and hundreds (if not thousands) of other political prisoners? No, even if you leave, even if you distance yourself from the tragedy, you won't stop watching it...

I'd like to end on a consoling, if not entirely optimistic, note, but where can I find one? All I can do is to repeat what I started with, but quietly, under my breath: good man, hold on... Just think — maybe he'll make it?

So, that was what I wrote a year and a half ago. The comparison of my home country to Germany in the mid-1930s that I made in this essay was even more accurate than we then imagined. Recently Navalny has received a new, very long term of imprisonment for something he is obviously not guilty of. The conditions of his detention have become even more unbearable, and he has been joined by new victims of the regime, a few of whom I mentioned earlier.

I would also like to speak about how I see the role of the Russian writer, the artist, in the current situation. I think the key word here is *humility*. It is not our stories or speeches that determine the fate of the world, but the courage of the Ukrainian people and its President, their fighting spirit, and, of course, the readiness of Western countries to render military and economic aid. Moreover, the sense of national shame and disgrace experienced by each of us can hardly encourage us to make great artistic discoveries. As for the so-called cancellation of Russian culture, it is quite obvious that it is not happening in Europe, but mainly in Russia itself, where theatres are closed and the freedoms of speech and of the press are severely restricted. As for the fact that these days someone in Poland or the Baltic States is not dancing *The Nutcracker* or staging *Boris Godunov*, we cannot do much about it. The criminal gang that seized power in my home country has nothing to do with any kind of culture, whether you call it imperialistic or not. Did Putin attack Ukraine because he read too many Russian books or listened too much of Russian music? No, he did not. The only comforting thing I have to say in this regard is that all wars come to an end, and this one is no exception. Russian language and culture can stand up for themselves, so Tchaikovsky will remain Tchaikovsky, and Pushkin will remain Pushkin. And we too will remain who we are.

Finally, I would like to say a few, if not optimistic, then at least consoling words. Unlike Navalny, I do not hope to live to see a time when Russia will be happy, and it does not in fact deserve happiness. However, I believe that the current war will end with a victory for Ukraine and the total expulsion of Russian troops from its territory. Wishing defeat on the country where I was born and grew up is hard, but the alternative is much scarier. In addition to the reports from the front lines, I am, in particular, convinced by the fact that, according to my observations, in Russian society, the leadership of the country and the army have finally lost their sense that they are on the side of right — and without that feeling, even when it is false, any kind of victory is impossible. In

Russian language the word “right” (*pravota*) has the same root as the words “truth” (*pravda*), “law” (*pravo*), and “righteous” (*pravednik*). And today, speaking from this podium and recalling the name of the great Dutchman, the *pravednik*, the righteous among the nations Rudolph Cleveringa, we speak with confidence of the imminent triumph of law and truth.