

I walk to my local version of “Les Deux Magots” to do some scribbling on this relatively hot, sweaty day. By the standards of Doha or Lahore, Odesa is deliciously cool, but folks here would turn the air-conditioning up to the max if there was any reliable electrical power.

A young couple stands on the sidewalk under a cherry tree, reaching up to the unpicked branches, chewing greedily and unselfconsciously. I pass people rummaging through dumpsters, a trend that’s grown as Ukraine’s economy has struggled. Official statistics show over one in four Ukrainians falls under the poverty line today, a huge jump since the full-scale Russian invasion started over two years ago.

Arriving at the cafe, coffee ordered, I start to think about why I’m here.

Recently an African friend, wondering at my commitment to Ukraine, casually asked “are you of Ukrainian origin?”. I was a bit taken aback by this. There’s not a drop of Ukrainian blood in my veins, and in any case it struck me as absurd that battling injustice might somehow be dependent on ones genetic makeup But of course I shouldn’t be surprised. Tribalism (let’s call it what it is) is as human as bipedalism and opposable thumbs. And it’s often especially widespread among those of us whose ancestors arrived from places that were historically oppressed. Many in the Jewish, Palestinian and Armenian diasporas work feverishly to support their respective countries. It was once an article of faith for proud Irish-Americans to contribute to a united Ireland and sometimes, more ominously, to the IRA. Today, Ukrainians around the globe have rallied to their nation with great vigor and generosity. But there are also thousands of foreigners here



helping the cause, as aid workers, journalists, advocates and fighters. Some, like the Georgians and Belarusians who carry arms in the International Legion see in Ukraine's struggle the final battle against Russian colonialism. They sense the moment has arrived to topple the imperial mindset that imposed the Russian language on conquered peoples from Lithuania to Kazakhstan, and that taught Kyrgyz and Estonians that Tolstoy and Pushkin were infinitely better than any cultural icons their Lilliputian cultures might have to offer. In the ever egocentric Western mind, colonialism has always been "our crime", something carried out by the Belgians, English, Dutch, French, Germans, Portuguese and Spanish. In fact, the world's largest empire and one of its most brutal was the Soviet Union.

Over the past few years, in one former French African colony after another, but especially in the Sahel, there's been a seismic popular revolt against anything associated with the former colonial masters. In a shocking turn, the French army, long used to flexing its military muscle in Africa, has been forced from Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic, Mali and Niger. And in its place, many of these countries have invited in Russian mercenaries, trading one form of colonialism for another.

There are all sorts of reasons for this dramatic shift in allegiance, which I'm sure The Economist readers among you already know, so there's no need for me to offer political analysis. Today's blog is simply an appeal to adopt a cause that's not ours. Defending one's own kind is a relatively simple exercise. Supporting people who speak a foreign tongue, who sometimes act inexplicably, who have different myths and legends, this takes some more effort.

In the early months of the war, a friend in Washington also asked me about my motivations, suggesting that perhaps it was easier for me as a white Westerner to sympathize with Ukrainians, to feel their pain more acutely because of some racial-cultural affinity. I don't think her intention was to offend, but her question rankled me and I replied to her, saying, in part:

I'm a white man who raised two black children, and spent thirty years doing humanitarian work in Africa, often in bleakly bloody places. I've shed angry tears for the people of Liberia, Rwanda, Congo, Ethiopia and many other places. And today I grieve for Ukraine. Not because of any racial/racist affiliation, but simply because I once worked there, during an earlier Russian invasion, and the people treated me well. I liked their fatty foods and their dark humor, their churches and their

infinitely deep sense of identity. They don't deserve the appalling cruelty that Putin is inflicting upon them any more than countless Tutsis and Tigrayans deserved their grim fates. But I can only hold so much sadness in my heart at any one time, and right now it's reserved for the Ukrainians.

www.inthetrenchesukraine.org