

Memory in the Age of Impunity

Article by Peter Pomerantsev

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There were once “grand narratives” that explained everything from the behaviour of states to literature. The collapse of connected storylines calls for new thinking on what binds us, from Manila to Silicon Valley to Moscow. This essay by Peter Pomerantsev was published by Coda Story in October 2021. Just a few months later, the war in Ukraine plunged many societies into political and economic crisis as its consequences rippled around the world unpredictably. His words about how the struggles for rights and freedoms are always connected are more urgent than ever.

“Dear Peter. I have been waiting to write to you for a long time, but the latest news has made it clear that it is simply dangerous to remain silent.

My former colleagues are in prison. For many months my friends and I have found it difficult to get any attention from world media. Now something has happened that caught the attention of the biggest news agencies — but I wonder how long it will last. Is there any way to hold the attention? I feel like we’re all hostages here — and it’s scary. Now everything, any crime, has become possible here.”

I received this message from a friend in Belarus this summer, a couple of days after the nation’s dictator Alexander Lukashenko used a MiG fighter jet to ground an international commercial flight as it crossed “his” airspace and hauled off a Belarusian journalist and his girlfriend who had been living in supposed safety in Lithuania. A few days later the captured journalist, Roman Protasevich, appeared on state-run TV with visible marks of torture and confessed to treachery in scenes reminiscent of Stalinist show trials.

There was some outrage in what we like to call the international community; the words “hijacking” and even “terrorist act” were used. And then, as my friend feared, all was forgotten. Lukashenko faced mild consequences, such as a ban on the Belarus state airline flying into Europe. His message to anyone who dared to oppose him was more potent: I can do what I want to you, anywhere you might be.

I struggled to answer my friend’s plea. For a single event to be remembered it needs to be sustained by a bigger story that it flows into. Anyone who has played a memory game will know that you remember discrete things by putting them into a sequence where they take on significance as part of a larger whole. Likewise in media and politics, one scene only has power as part of a larger narrative.

But Lukashenko’s outrageous crimes haven’t clicked into a greater chain of meaning. And it’s not just Belarus. From Burma to Syria, Yemen to Sri Lanka, we have more evidence than ever of crimes against humanity — of torture, chemical attacks, barrel bombings, rape, repression, and arbitrary detention. But the evidence struggles to compel attention, let

alone consequences. We have more opportunities to publish; we aren't limited by geography; our audience is potentially global. Yet most revelations or investigations fail to resonate. Why?

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A connected narrative breaks apart

The collapse of the Soviet Union should have spurred introspection and encouraged us to exclude no one from the greater story of human rights against political repression. And, for a moment in the 1990s, this seemed possible. As the wave of democratisation overturned both pro-Soviet and pro-American dictatorships across the world; as the International Criminal Court was set up in The Hague in 1998; as humanitarian interventions were waged successfully from the Western Balkans to East Africa, it seemed that justice would be meted out more equitably.

But then something different happened. Instead of letting more characters into the human rights story, the whole story collapsed. A situation where some victims got more attention than others was replaced by a situation where no victims got any sustained attention. The horrors of World War II had compelled the world to adopt the UN Declaration of Human Rights, at least in principle, and the post-Cold War catastrophes in Srebrenica and Rwanda had encouraged humanitarian interventions and created a momentum towards a "right to protect."

In previous crimes against humanity, ignorance was always an excuse. From Auschwitz to Srebrenica to Rwanda, leaders could claim that they were either unaware of the facts, the facts were equivocal, or that events unfolded too quickly for them to act. But now we have access to omniscient media that often brings us abundant and instantaneous evidence - yet it means less than ever before. The tableau of crimes remains a mess of broken images.

This felt different in the Cold War. Then there seemed a connection between the arrest of one, single Soviet dissident and a larger geopolitical, institutional, moral, cultural, and historical struggle. Media, books, and movies of that time told the stories of discrete political prisoners and human rights abuses as part of a larger, joined-up tale in the great battle of freedom versus dictatorship, a battle for the soul of history. And the whole story made the public in democracies feel better about themselves, was part of an identity: we are on the side of freedom versus tyranny. There were institutions that supported this narrative and identity. Political prisoners would feel less vulnerable when information about their arrest was announced on the BBC or Radio Free Europe, taken up by Amnesty International, announced at the UN, raised by U.S. presidents in bilateral summits with Soviet leadership.

Together all these elements sustained attention. And when the West's own sins were revealed, such as the CIA's program of Cold War covert assassinations and coups in the

1970s, it meant there was an existing framework through which to capture the attention and outrage of the Western public.

There was what one might call a “grand narrative” that informed and enveloped everything from the behaviour of states to literature and art to how people understood themselves. It was bound up with Enlightenment ideals of “progress” and “liberation,” where facts and evidence were something to be respected, confirmed or refuted by rational argument or verifiable evidence. Even the Soviet regime was locked into a language and worldview where rights – the rights of colonised peoples and the economically oppressed primarily – could at least matter theoretically. They even signed human rights pledges, which allowed Soviet dissidents to demand the Kremlin’s leaders “obey their own laws.”

The grand narratives, of course, had their problems. They often privileged victims of rival ideologies while leaving continent-sized blind spots. Priests murdered in Poland by the Communists would get more attention in Western media than priests killed by U.S. allies in El Salvador. The Red Army crushing rebellions in Budapest and Prague was covered with infinitely more intensity than the crushing of British anti-colonial rebellions in Kenya.

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In this contest of grand ideas, with each side proclaiming its ideals as superior, space was opened for dissidents to demand that the powers live up to the ideals; in the periphery, these ideals were invoked to demand support by liberation movements, colonised by one camp or the other.

Yet, “the checks written out in 1945 to the most vulnerable people in the world – marked ‘international humanitarian law’ – are bouncing” says David Miliband, the former British foreign minister and present head of the International Rescue Committee. We have entered what he calls the Age of Impunity: “A time when militaries, militias, and mercenaries in conflicts around the world believe they can get away with anything, and because they can get away with anything, they do everything.”

The collapse came partly from within. The language of rights and freedoms was hollowed out by leaders who misused it, leaving husks empty of meaning. The Soviet regime shredded the language of economic justice and equality – so that even today the mere mention of the term “socialist” is anathema to many in the former Communist bloc. In the West the lofty language of freedom and tyranny was deployed in the service of unprovoked wars and was sullied by war’s inevitable consequences. In 2003, President George W Bush had deliberately connected the battles of the Cold War with his vision for the Middle East ahead of the U.S. invasion of Iraq promising that “democracy will succeed” and “freedom can be the future of every nation.” Instead, the invasion brought civil war and hundreds of thousands of deaths; it enhanced Iran’s power and turned Syria into the fulcrum of a new authoritarian axis. Among people in rich democracies, it engendered cynicism, souring them on their own self-identity. Words imbued with powerful meaning in East Berlin and Prague lost their purpose in Baghdad. Images did too.

Along with this rot from inside was the attack from outside. The great leitmotif of contemporary Russian and now Chinese propaganda is that the desire for freedom and the fight for rights leads not to prosperity but to misery and bloodshed. Russian propaganda channels like to splice shots of people-powered revolutions in Syria or Ukraine together with images of the ensuing conflicts in those countries, as if the war was the inevitable product of revolts, rather than the response by dictatorships to crush them. Unlike democracy – the not-so-subtle message goes – dictatorship is strong and stable.

From grand narrative to a cohesive story

This year's Nobel Peace Prize [2021] was shared by two journalists: Maria Ressa, the editor of *Rappler*, in the Philippines, and Dmitry Muratov, the editor of *Novaya Gazeta*, from Russia. And if we look at their work closely, we see something interesting emerging.

Maria Ressa's plight could have been utterly esoteric to the world. She is a journalist under attack from the Philippine government for criticising the extrajudicial murders committed under President Rodrigo Duterte. Journalists are attacked every day across the world, and in the Philippines are regularly killed without drawing much attention overseas. Even the mass killings Maria (who serves on *Coda Story's* board of directors) reported on, with thousands killed by pro-government gangs, rarely merit a global headline. Yet Maria's story held attention. How?

When she dug into what was happening to her, Maria saw that there was something in the form of Duterte's attacks, his use of troll armies and cyber militias to intimidate, besmirch, and break his opponents, that was both new and universal. He was not merely imposing censorship, he was overloading social media with noise, so the truth was blotted out, distorting reality. Maria made the issue not just about the Philippines but also about Facebook, the harms of social media, the lawlessness of digital disinformation. Her campaign, and the way she told her story, led not just to the Presidential Palace in Manila, but also to Silicon Valley, to every election distorted by online manipulation, to every conflict fuelled through digital hate campaigns, to every woman or minority bullied or harassed on social media, to any parent worried about what's happening to their kids online. Her story became vital for any lawmaker and civil servant thinking about how to regulate this new frontier. It updated how we think about freedom of expression in the digital dimension, forcing tech companies to at least admit that inauthentic coordinated campaigns were not legitimate speech but a form of censorship. One real person saying one unpleasant thing is fine. But when a handful of trolls pretend to be thousands of non-existent people saying the same thing, that is something different.

And Maria's research joined up countries that had never been put into the same sequence. No one has ever thought about Russia and the Philippines together. Their dissidents don't meet. They were on different sides in the Cold War. But now these two capitals of online manipulation became part of one coherent story. Maria looked to investigations by Russian journalists to understand what was going on in her own country, began to see Russia and the Philippines as one frontline of digital authoritarianism.

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before.*

And Russia was one of the birth places of another seemingly local issue that became a global narrative. When Russian activists and journalists first tried to tell the world, in the early Putin era, about how their regime was based on stealing money from state assets and laundering it in Western countries, most shrugged. Who cares? It might be bad for Russia, but it made London and New York richer, and the Kremlin weaker. It took a decade of slow, painful arguments and evidence-gathering to show that corruption in Russia and Africa, Central Asia, and the Middle East was not just a local tragedy. It affected us too. It was also a way to infiltrate and undermine democracies, compromise our foreign policy, suborn politicians, and fund far-right politics. It created an elite that used the influence and leverage to start wars and get away with it, because Western countries were now dependent on corrupt investments. It was creating a world where the global rich were living with another set of rules, free of domestic justice anywhere, and that, in turn, was fuelling the inequality and anger that undermined people's faith in democratic institutions. And the enemy was not just in the Kremlin, but also among the middlemen and money launderers in respectable offices in New York and London.

It was a challenge to show that the tragedy of a hospital in northern Russia, pillaged by bureaucrats buying property in London, was also something that people in the Pentagon should care about. Today corruption (or to be more precise kleptocracy and money laundering) has become a central security agenda for the new U.S. administration. But it took years of work to unearth the links that lie buried beneath the noise of news and the narcissistic gaze of social media, and to make something seemingly tangential a story that runs through all our lives.

So that is the task: to unearth the interconnecting tendrils of issues, intertwining roots of problems that crisscross the world more intensely than ever, and whose larger significance is yet to be discovered. Before, the grand narrative of democracy used to pass over us, like a plane that you could board from a platform called "human rights." Now we work with shovels. Prodding on a mound that seems just an anomaly in one corner of the garden, but upon excavating and pulling, its rhizomes lead us to the garden next door. This is a new mission for journalism. To work out why an issue in Manila is also about Silicon Valley and about Moscow and about you. To find the sudden intersection between countries no one ever thought about as part of a single map before. Because these new lines are there, they don't need to be created — they need to be unearthed. And then one discrete event can have meaning for many, one newspaper article can resonate across borders. New publics, who never even thought of each other as having anything in common, can be brought together. And this new journalism needs to do more than just draw new lines and connect new audiences — it needs to dig out the contours of the discussion which offers the solution to the issues it unearths, offering its audiences a chance to transform from passive players to participants in the formulation of a future.

For though the old story of "waves of democratisation," of easily defined and relatable "declarations of human rights" has faded, people still risk their lives and livelihood to protest and fight for....well, for what? We have had, in recent years, seen more protests

across the world as at any time for decades. From Hong Kong to Tbilisi, Sudan to Chile. And, of course, Belarus. Belarus which was always dismissed as happy with its degenerate dictator, satisfied with the compromise between stability and rule of a single man. And then suddenly, impossibly, the whole country rose up. Not just urban liberals but pensioners and factory workers.

But unlike in 1989, we don't think of all these protests across the world together. Don't see them as part of one inevitable, coherent History. The rights they demand are very different. The regimes they fight against don't necessarily abide by old distinctions between democracies and dictatorships. And yet something still itches away at people. Some sort of underlying urge, a need that can't be satisfied. What connects all these different movements? What will we find in our process of excavation? Maybe, lurking underneath is something coherent, all the tendrils leading to a whole, something alive, huge, all-remembering, global, terrible - preparing to give the epic troves of evidence, the terabytes of data recording crimes against humanity and abuse, a purpose, and a meaning.

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