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["My Job Is To Kill People And Destroy Things":
A Reflection On The Carnage In Ukraine](#)

By
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When I see the carnage in Ukraine, the bodies of slaughtered civilians and the buildings without walls or crumpled into rubble, I wonder how anyone can have done that. How can Putin have ordered it? How can Generals have accepted his orders? How can Russian troops have carried out their orders? I do not understand how the same species that is capable of love and courage can be capable of the slaughter of war. I do not understand how people can talk about "war" without being morally overwhelmed by concrete images of what war is.

I am reminded of my encounter with an American Air Force General in 1967. He was the commander of NATO in Norway at the time. I was traveling with some other young Americans, one of whose fathers was planning to hire the General after he retired. He and his wife were extremely hospitable and put us up for a few days at their lovely home in Oslo. To welcome us they had a barbecue party where we all enjoyed American style hamburgers and steak and happily had too much to drink.

This was during the summer when *Time Magazine* did a cover story that broke the news about psychedelic drug use in America—a tremendous shock to most people at the time. As the General got drunk, he turned to me—clearly a hippie because I had a beard, which was very unusual at the time—and asked me to explain the attraction of these drugs. I, stupidly, tried to explain to him the concept of opening the doors of perception to an alternative vision of truth. He looked at me as if I were an alien from outer space and asked, "What does that have to do with me? My job is to kill people and destroy things."

Looking back, I should have expected him to say something about the pragmatics of being a peacekeeper and a defender of human lives, but that is not what he said. He said his job was to kill people and destroy things. At that time, I did not have a very clear vision of what that meant. The War in Vietnam produced some reports of atrocities but not like the daily TV coverage we get today from Ukraine, which has given me a very precise view of what killing people and destroying things in war means. The General, however, was a veteran of World War II and the Korean War. He

certainly knew the carnage of war when he said his job was to kill people and destroy things.

So how could he have said it? Yes, the alcohol had loosened his tongue and he was being provocative to a young, good-for-nothing kid who he was forced to be polite to for practical reasons. But he could have given me a lecture on the pragmatics of human life vs. naïve aesthetic and spiritual visions. Instead, he said, "My job is to kill people and destroy things."

Amazing! He was a decent man, a family man, a hardworking man, a patriot, but he was also a man who was prepared to kill people and destroy things if ordered to do so.

It's commonplace that good people will accept orders to do terrible things to other good people. Nazi concentration guards pushed Jews and others into gas chambers and later went home to dinner with their families. The "banality of evil" Hannah Arendt called it.

Yes, it's commonplace and always has been, but I don't understand how it's a normal part of human life. Despite the widespread belief that history will ultimately lead humanity to a humane form of life, the carnage of war appears to be par for the historical course.

I don't understand.

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