

Wars of choice and wars of existence

Diana Popa

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What are we defending?¹

During my military service as a European foreign fighter with the Armed Forces for the defence of Ukraine, I came across circumstances that made me reflect upon the questions “What are we defending – territory, people, values or all of these?”, “How do we choose to do this?” and ultimately “What is the core of a state and of a nation?”. Practical circumstances and closeness to the area of impact made the answers to these questions more concrete than when reflecting upon them from a distance.

For me, and as an European, being a foreign fighter in Ukraine was a personal, value driven fight, for which I had travelled almost 2500 km up to the border with the enemy’s territory and afterwards for which I trained with men from many countries from around the world on military base in Ukraine. I lived by the principle of taking the fight to the enemy: in the final location, he was in front and some 2500 kilometres of integrated defended territory stretched at my back.

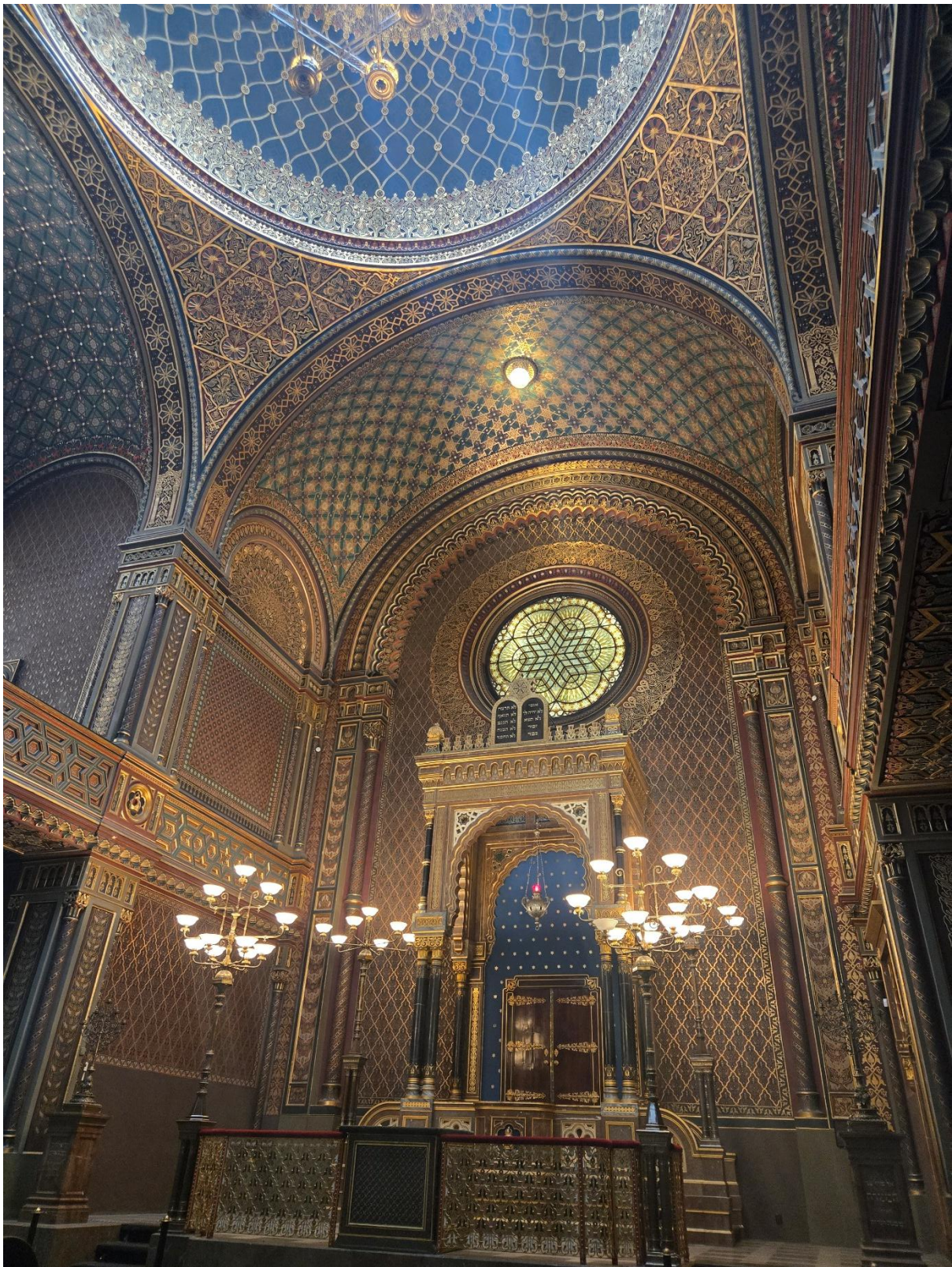
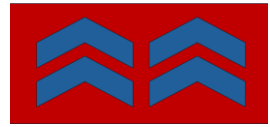
For someone preparing for going into battle, like I was in the autumn of 2025, the lessons and inspirations I needed for maintaining the will to fight for existential survival did not come from present-day Europe. Many came from Israel. Few Western states in modern history have faced prolonged existential wars. I have personally learned from how Israel answers these questions and lives by the answers, and I believe the West could do the same. It is a lesson on fighting an existential war as a matter of choice for preserving the core of the state, the nation and the national identity. In contrast, experiences of diluted or compromised value systems do not allow for this.

Before enlisting in Ukraine and while on military base during training I read and reread writings about existential wars for body and spirit and their consequences, including: Primo Levi’s *The Drowned and the Saved*, Douglas Murry’s *Democracy and Death Wish*, Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and her essay *We refugees*. Both Arendt’s essay and Levi’s fundamental work reverberated strongly years later after I had first read them, because now I observed similarities with the stories of foreign fighters and gave new understandings to the principle that when the scale of the crime is so great that everyone is guilty, no one is guilty.

While on military base or later, in the safe house next to the frontline, I listened to the audio versions of *Rise and Kill First* by Ronen Bergman and *The Sword of Freedom: Israel, Mossad and the Secret War* by Cohen Yossi. Reading and listening to these representative texts served a similar function to the commandment from Deutons 20:2.:

And it shall be, when ye draw nigh unto the battle, that the priest shall approach and speak unto the people.

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Spanish Synagogue, Prague, 2026
Source: The Author.



It reminded me of one sunny autumn Sunday, when the Battalion priest came on base, offering prayers for protection from drones to the men preparing to go into battle, holding AKAs in their hands while listening to the priest.

Yet more than the written or spoken texts, it was that lived experience of the existential war that prepared and taught what that existential encounter with the enemy meant and what beliefs and values system enabled and maintained the willingness to stay engaged in that primordial fight.



The merchant, the priest and the abandoned lover

Contrast offers clarity in border demarcation. Communities distinguish others from the members of their own community by what they are not, by difference, marking the border between the inside and the outside through this perception of otherness. The European community has neither achieved to become one living organism with a unified internal identity nor be perceived by others as such. The difference in perception between member states regarding the threat posed by Russia is only one symptom of this. Europe lacks the vital energy needed in an existential fight because she is still set on becoming a unifying project focused on enabling internal cohesion and forgot what an existential fight entails.

As a reflection of this, one can answer the questions of: “When was Europe as a whole attacked from the outside by a near-peer power and had its entire existence threatened?” or “When did Europe have to fight for survival as one entity?”. Europe’s recent struggles have been from within.

In Europe, democracy is practiced as theory and this theoretical practical exercise is being replicated in various domains, including defence, where negotiations and procedures outweigh implementation because defence is seen as a peace time exercise or benefit endowed upon to us by a long time external partner. It is thus not that Europe does not fear because she does not see the danger, she does not fear because she has been anesthetized into self-oblivion by comfort, conformity and boundless internal accommodation in the name of practicing theories of democracy. NATO and in particular Europe have long approached defence as a business or a love affair, respectively. Because defence is a business and not an existential necessity, it requires long horizon planning, budgeting, resource allocation and prioritization, long time contracts, forecasts, and endless rounds of negotiations within the alliance. None of these are timely or sufficient for existential wars.

Faced with the peril coming from Russia, Europe refuses to accept that she faces an existential threat, because this would necessarily mean going through an internal change she – Europe - is not ready for, and that conflicts with the comfortable democratic principles keeping the current internal balance in place. Remaining in reactive mode, Europe scrambles for alternatives when confronted with the idea of a global interest realignment and focus shift of the US away from Europe, acting much like an abandoned lover. Because she counted on that attachment relationship for so long, she gave up its defence capacity and slowly diluted the necessary energy needed for self-defence, while reprimanding nations like Israel who, in fighting existential wars, were faced with war necessary actions.

In the European project, nation making has been sacrificed for the democratic exercise of the European coalition, yet the second is lived ideologically at the top level and by means of practical benefits at the middle and lower levels, while neither of these is enough for actively facing existential threats. Coalitions average values and positions and dilute the fundamental



sense of nationhood into a melting pot that when called upon at best exercises a task but does not live it.

The critical stance that Europe has towards nations that fight wars of existence, such as Israel or Ukraine, reflects the manifestation of her own lived experience and a story of how in time means become superior to purpose: that of the consolidation of everyday choices into procedural entrapment, leading to the inevitable flaw of a project that is endlessly focused on procedural justice at the cost of its own survival. Loud judgement passed through such a lens becomes unfitting.



Arrangements, appeasements and accommodation

Because Europe has always put values at the core of her identity, it is that more tragic that now she seeks internal appeasement by reaching uncomfortable agreements needed to take external positioning. By averaging those values into a compromise solution that ends up representing none of its members but rather only the synthetic mean of an internally negotiated solution, it compromises on precisely the core of its proclaimed identity – her values. Survival by means of assumed and unapologetic defence of the core of what makes the state and not by means of seeking temporary compromises is what separates responses to threats that are existential from the ones that are perceived as anything less than existential. It is the difference between an existential fight and the preference for a negotiated alternative, whatever it may be. The first is a choice that can be defended in time because it does not affect the very core of the state, the second a political statement ensuring temporary survival.

If totalitarian regimes eliminate the practical possibility of choice when they become successful through complete internalisation and assimilation of the cause, democratic ones downgrade the exercise of choice by equalizing all causes. Worse still, democracy projects become apologetic when accused of not being accommodating enough and demand the same from others, further enhancing the spiral of identity dilution. Weakened sense of identity and cohesion allow for easy conquest of territory in the form of people's hearts and minds by other strong narratives since the latter encounter only a feeble resistance from a mosaic of unrelated causes. On this background, the question of "What are we protecting?" becomes that more difficult to answer.

The experience on the frontlines gives clarity to this question. It signals out the enemy and carves a temporary opposition of forces: us and them. This opposition becomes blurred from afar, watered-down by abstract ideas and value placed on procedures, and is furthered diluted by the internalized exercise of accommodation streaming from a flawed practice of democracy.

War and politics are inherently linked. The front transforms abstract ideas into consequential choices. I believe that any politician directly involved in the defence sector must have military experience. Because only those who went through the experience of an existential fight know what is necessary in order to defend the state starting from the ground up, the impossible actions needed to achieve this purpose as well as split-second decision making capability and adaptability when not only your life is at stake but the lives of the ones you personally know.



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About the author.

Diana Popa has extensive experience in the academic world, has published widely on defence and security topics. Her recent book [Frontlines A foreign fighter in Ukraine](#) is a personal account of war, purpose and politics.

Red Sky 4
The Netherlands
www.redsky4.nl
Redsky4@ziggo.nl