

TENSES



by Ralph Berry

By their tenses shall ye know them. Those not inoculated against the wiles of the English language may have been taken in by Daniel Johnson's war-cry headline in the Telegraph (3 September) : THE WAR IS TURNING IN UKRAINE'S FAVOUR. You mean, it hasn't won yet, in spite of the daily assurances that things are going Ukraine's way? What has happened to the serene path to the future that the media have promised since the conflict began?

The answer is simplicity itself. The triumph of Ukraine is predicated on the future. So are the benefits, which resemble any large-scale advertising campaign. But once advertising is brought into play the entire belief-system, which is founded on belief, looks shakier.

The main reasons for disbelief are well known. The Russian army is not about to collapse because it has yielded some expensive metres to the Ukraine summer offensive. The pace of technological aid has slackened, mainly because of increasing

doubts about the Ukrainians' capacity to win the war.

The donor countries need the arms for themselves in any case.

Everything hangs on the attitude of the US. and nobody knows what this will be. So the strategy for Russia is obviously to sit tight and wait for events to declare themselves. 'I don't understand why Putin would end his invasion until he knows the outcome of the US Presidential election,' said Michael McFaul, Barack Obama's chief Russia adviser and former ambassador to Moscow.

'Explain to me your plan for getting him to negotiate now.'
(Owen Matthews, SPECTATOR, 2 September) The logic is irrefragable.

But while the main players can afford to await developments, this is not true of Zelensky. Of the main battle tanks that are pledged to be delivered in good time, suffice it to say: put not your trust in tanks. Heaven help Ukraine when they are delivered and it is time to use them. The Russians can then display their latest tank-busting drones. Some will come from Iran, where an English expression comes to hand 'cheap as chips'. Expense is no object in this sphere of warfare, unlike the metalled-up main battle tanks.

The larger picture is the reputation of the regime. Zelensky has just sacked his minister of defence, Oleskii Reznikov, who has headed the department since Russia invaded in February 2022. 'I believe the ministry needs new approaches.' It does indeed, and battle strategy is only one of them.

Corruption in the draft process is rife, with thousands of men trying to dodge the call-up. The fair name of Ukraine is now irreversibly besmirched, with consequences that run far beyond the immediate scandal. There's a damning, well-documented article in the Telegraph (3 September) which gives some glistening examples of the rewards of draft corruption. Yevhen Borysov, the military commissar of the Odesa Oblast, took

close to 200 bribes as well as illegally fleeing the country during martial law. Mr Borisov used more than £3.4 million 'to purchase a five-bedroom villa with a swimming pool and sauna in the upmarket tourist resort of Marbella'. (Some doubts here on the taste and judgment of Borisov—Majorca is much classier than Marbella.) Still, the 'fairytale house' was bought under his wife's name. He should be safe for a while.

The scandal goes well beyond the property-owning Mme Reznikov. In some regions the number of exemptions from military service due to medical commission decisions has increased 10-fold since February last year. The scandal is now open, and the latest news is that Kyiv cracks down on health exemptions from combat. The melancholy conclusion is that in spite of their stainless cause, a large number of Ukrainians are not prepared to fight for it.

Shakespeareans will recognize the draft-dodging technique. The prime example is in HENRY IV, Part II, when Falstaff, well advised by his sergeant Bardolph, chooses to reject Bullcalf and Mouldy from the draft though they are the likeliest men. They have promised Bardolph forty crowns, who keeps ten crowns for his own cut. Bullcalf plays the medical card: 'I am a diseased man...A whoreson cold, sir, a cough.' Mouldy is distressed by his elderly mother. 'She has nobody to do anything about her when I am gone.' There is nothing here that would not be instantly comprehended in Ukraine today.

And yet it is not all cynicism. Francis Feeble defies his name-tag:

'A man can die but once. We owe God a death. I'll ne'er bear a base mind.

An't be my destiny, so; an't be not, so. No man's too good to serve's prince.

And let it go which way it will, he that dies this year is

quit for the next.'

Those would have been the sentiments of soldiers in the trenches of Bakhmut.