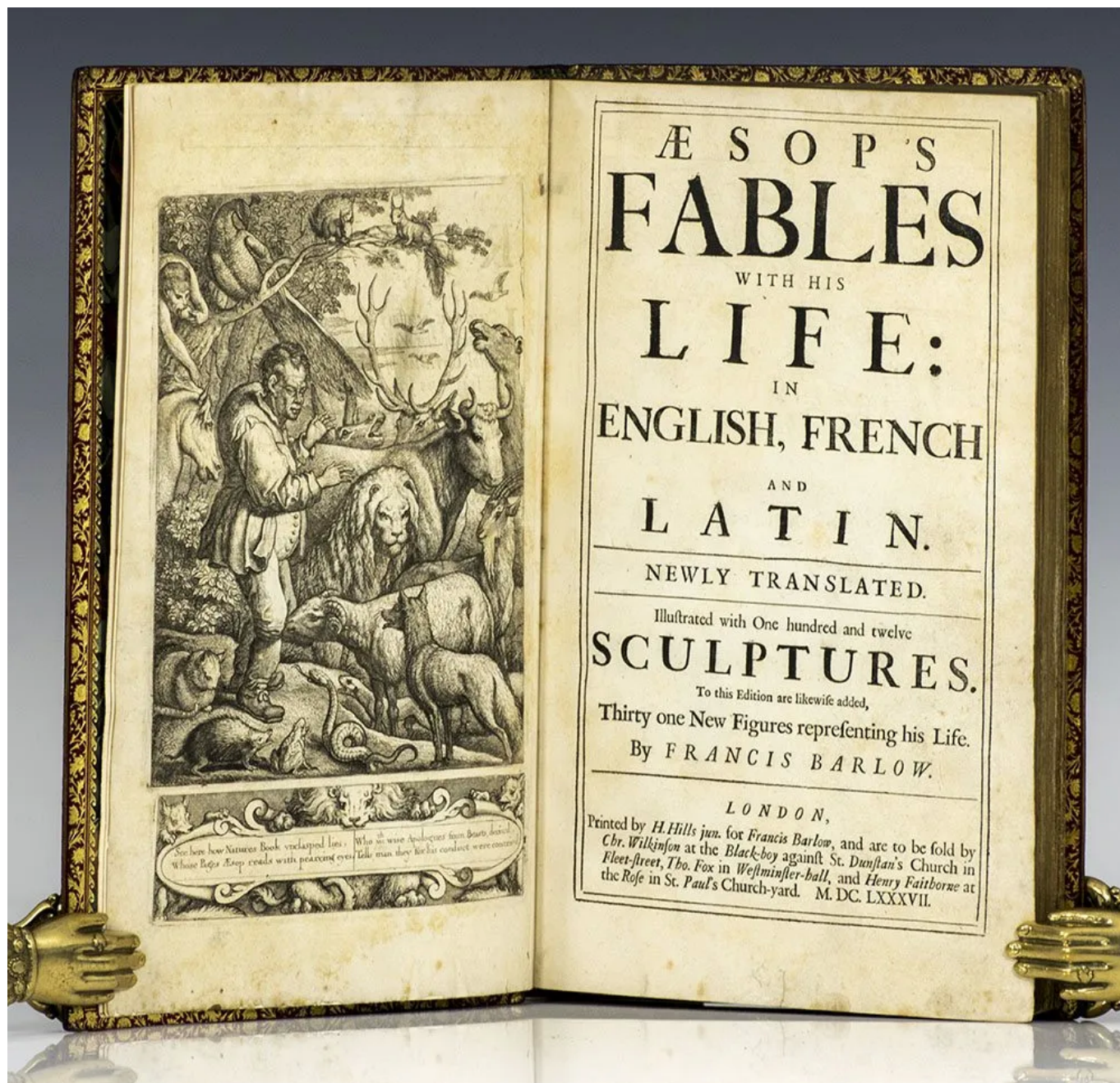


Ukraine war, told in Aesop's fables



by Lev Tsitrin

With the first anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine fast approaching, the review of the passed year shows how motivations for the war, and its very conduct stick to patterns known since antiquity. Truly, the more things change, the more they stay the same.

Weapons evolved since the times of Aesop – spear and arrow are now replaced by machine-guns, and catapults – by artillery and satellite-guided missiles. But the mindset of those ordering their use has not changed one bit, it seems.

Just consider the onset of Ukraine war and compare it to the fable of the *Wolf and the Lamb*. The parallels are striking. In the fable, the Wolf is hungry and the Lamb is tender, juicy and tasty. Yet, instead of just pouncing, Aesop's Wolf seeks to justify his action. He shows the Lamb guilty many times over: it dared to muddy Wolf's drink (though the Lamb drinks downstream from the Wolf); the Lamb insulted the Wolf a year prior (though the Lamb is yet a suckling), Wolf's final argument – that the Wolf is strong and the Lamb is weak does work – and settles the matter: the Lamb is torn to pieces and eaten by the Wolf. Compare this to Russia's behavior: before invading, Putin accused Ukraine of not being a state, but having been carved by Lenin's whim out of Russian territory; he accused Ukraine's leaders of being Nazi drug addicts; he accused Ukraine of planning to develop bio-weapons to use on Russians, and of being a conduit for the West's gay propaganda aimed at enervating and depopulating the Russian nation to make it easy prey of the "collective West." Just like in the fable, it mattered naught that those accusations were meritless: having convinced himself of the rightness of his cause, Putin pounced – just as the Wolf did.

But there was one problem – while it was tasty and juicy enough, the Ukrainian lamb turned out to not be exactly a lamb – it had some pretty sharp teeth of its own. Russian offensive stalled, the fable of the *Wolf and the Lamb* turning into a fable of the *Viper and the File* in which Aesop tells us of a viper that crawled into a blacksmiths' shop in search of food and sunk its teeth into a file. Getting annoyed, the file said, "there is not a chance of your taking a bite out of me. I am stronger than iron. Better drop me and go your way before your teeth get badly damaged."

Russians learned this lesson a few weeks into the invasion – but couldn't retreat, they now finding themselves in the situation described in the fable of the *Dog and its Reflection in the Water*, the Dog, having stolen a piece of meat, and running away, happened to cross a stream – and in it, it saw another dog with another piece of meat in its jaws. Wanting both hunks for itself, it opened the jaws to snap at the other dog's possession – and lost its ill-gotten hunk, which promptly sank to the bottom. The fable's piece of meat is Crimea. As Putin snapped at the mainland Ukraine, he now risked losing possession of the Crimea occupied since 2014, which by international law is Ukrainian, because Ukrainians demanded that Russia withdraws to its international borders, not merely to the lines of February 24, 2022 invasion.

So, Putin had no choice but to persist – while modifying his tactics. In the giddy early days of the invasion, Russians spread themselves too thin, getting stuck in place and becoming prey to Ukrainians. Now, they removed their forces from the vicinity of Kiyv and Odesa, concentrating their strength in Donbas – but instead of calling this maneuver a “retreat” (a mean-sounding words smacking of tactical defeat), Putin chose to call it a “good-will gesture.” Needless to say, this comes straight out of the fable of the *Fox and the Grapes* – not willing to concede that it simply couldn't reach the lovely bunch of grapes, the Fox declared them sour, not worth the trouble of getting them.

This regrouping of troops resulted in the summer campaign in Donbas that went well enough until Ukrainians, buoyed by deliveries of Western, longer-range artillery and rockets, beat Russians to a stalemate, and in the fall launched a counter-offensive around Kharkyv and Kherson, regaining much of the lost territory. This caused a strategic re-thinking on the part of the Russians. Realizing that professional army would soon collapse, Putin resorted to mobilizing Russian civilians – who thus learned the meaning of the fable of the

Frogs who wanted a King. In it, hearing frogs' silly request, Jupiter threw them a log to act as their king; frogs complaining of that king's passivity, Jupiter anointed a stork to rule over them – and the king they wanted so much proceeded to eating his subjects. The same Russia public that allowed Putin to decimate institutions of free speech, and applauded his war, became its cannon fodder.

The situation continuing to be critical, there are voices on Russian TV loudly wondering why nuclear weapons have not been used on Ukraine – and on the West that supports it. This being the ultimate weapon of mass destruction designed to prevent an attack rather than be used in an attack, the response to its actual use may be devastating to Russia itself – but the loudmouths don't mind, they coming straight out of Aesop's fable of an *Envious Man* – to whom Jupiter promised to grant any wish, on the condition that his neighbor would get twice as much. A million gold coins resulting in his neighbor getting two million, the man chose to ask Jupiter to rip out his eye – so his neighbor would go completely blind.

Needless to say, we all hope that Russian TV maniacs won't prevail – but it is hard to dispute that the course of Ukraine war shows how little humanity had changed since the times of Aesop – if it changed at all. On the one hand, one stands in awe of Aesop's insight into human nature. On the other hand, looking at our 21st century that is as bloody as any in the presumably benighted past, doesn't one wish that today's humans were better than those described, under guise of animals, by Aesop at the dawn of human history, in 6th century BC?