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### Ukrainians are fighting and dying to defend their homes. Could I do the same?

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# Ukrainians are fighting and dying to defend their homes. Could I do the same? | Bruce Ledewitz

Bruce Ledewitz

by Bruce Ledewitz, Pennsylvania Capital-Star March 16, 2022

At the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the government [asked](#) ordinary citizens to attack Russian forces with homemade Molotov cocktails. Many did so.



Bruce Ledewitz  
(Capital-Star file)

I'm sure I'm not the only one to ask himself, would I have the courage to do that if I were a citizen of Ukraine?

Would I do that, knowing that it might very well result in my death?

Courage is not simply a matter of individual character. I've never been in combat, so I don't know my general level of physical courage.

Yet, if I thought that a Russian victory would mean suffering and death for my wife and my children, I'm certain I would be willing to fight and, if necessary, die, trying to prevent it.

But the Russian invasion of Ukraine is not exactly that situation. Putin is fighting a war of conquest to destroy Ukraine and incorporate it into Russia.

As bad as that might seem, people do live perfectly well in Russia. There is no reason to assume that I and my family would be rounded up and shot.

Is it worth dying for an independent Ukraine? Plus, the sacrifice of my life in defense of my country likely would not prevent that outcome. It probably would be pointless.

It is true that the world is genuinely united in helping Ukraine. Weapons are pouring in. Economic sanctions are real. People worldwide are even willing to pay higher prices for gas, knowing that cutting off Russian oil is really hurting Putin.

But in the end, no one is going to start WWII by putting soldiers on the ground to stop him. If Putin is determined to defeat Ukraine, he can and will do so.

I am not a religious person. I don't believe there is any life after death. So, I have to think carefully about all these things before I risk extinction for a hopeless cause.

In the end, the only way I could justify risking my life by taking up arms would be if freedom and democracy are the right of every human being. These principles in and of themselves must deserve my absolute loyalty. In other words, I can justify dying in this fight only if the Ukrainian cause is just.

The question is, do we any longer believe that values and rights are true in this way? That they are worth dying for?

America, and the West, are in a spiritual crisis. Once, we all had faith that truth, goodness, beauty and justice were real. Once, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., really did speak for us when he said that the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.

But, to put it mildly, it is not clear we all believe these things today.

People probably thought that the Death of God just meant that there were no miracles or that church attendance would go down. It did mean that.

But it went much further. The Death of God also meant, for many, that the universe is just a meaningless collection of forces and matter. There is no arc of history toward justice. In a universe like that, nothing is worth dying for. Sacrifice in such a view is meaningless. This viewpoint is called nihilism

Though I belong to no religion, I am confident that nihilism is wrong.

As I argue in my recent book, *The Universe Is on Our Side*, goodness, beauty, truth and justice are real and are validated by nature itself. Thus, I

think I would be willing to charge a Russian tank on a Kyiv street, in the belief that my life would be given for a cause that is objectively right.

Faith in objective meaning is the real question today and not just in Ukraine.

It is time to confront this issue—whether nihilism reflects reality or not. For it is clear that the despair, anger, fatalism and division in America today root exactly in the soil of nihilism.

Nihilism is why we say we live in a post-truth age. It is why we hate our political opponents rather than try to persuade them.

It is why we have lost faith in the future.

It is why we question dying for a cause.

The crisis in Ukraine, and the courage demonstrated there by ordinary people, presents America with an opportunity for a national renaissance. But we have to answer honestly. Are those ordinary people risking their lives for freedom and democracy heroes — or are they fools? Is there any sense in which their sacrifice is ultimately justified, whatever the outcome of this war?

Or, instead, is history just a jumble of events in which no action can really be said to be better than any other?

An ultimate decision like building a Molotov cocktail in my basement requires serious reflection about what I believe. But, of course, every day is ultimate in the same sense. My whole life is testimony to what I believe is the truth of things. We will all eventually face death and ask ourselves whether the life we lived was a good one. Was the right one.

Each of us goes down to the basement every day and must decide how to live.

**Opinion contributor Bruce Ledewitz teaches constitutional law at Duquesne University Law School in Pittsburgh. His work appears biweekly on the Capital-Star's Commentary Page. Listen to his podcast, "Bends Toward Justice" [here](#). His latest book, "The Universe Is On Our Side: Restoring Faith in American Public Life," is out now. His opinions do not represent the position of Duquesne University Law School.**