

PORTRAIT

On the wall of my dining-room I have a painting.
It is quite a large portrait
And dwarfs the other pictures in the room.
It is true to say that everyone who comes into the room
Is instantly drawn to it.
The caption states that it shows a 12-year old girl.
She is standing beside a table in a school-room,
Carrying a folder in her left hand.
She is wearing a brown dress with long sleeves,
And over the top of that is a white frilly pinafore.
An attractive girl, with long brown pigtails and dark, black eyes
She appears to stare right at you.
On the table is a vase full of brightly-coloured flowers,
Behind her is a blackboard on which a white dove has been drawn.
Above that the word Mir is written in Cyrillic script.
These details reveal what it is all about:
The first day of term in a Russian school.
The flowers are the traditional gift to the teacher,
And the dove and the word Mir tells us
That the very first lesson is on Peace.

The portrait is not by a professional artist,
But by another pupil, perhaps the same age as this girl.
Although it is a wonderful painting in its own right,
It is not perfect: one of the hands is a little bit blurred
Where the first attempt has been painted over,
Not entirely successfully,
And the head is just a bit too large for the body.
But therein lies the charm and the attraction.

I obtained the painting in the late 80s
When I was an escort at a youth peace camp in Hungary.
There were young people there from many European countries
Including Britain and The Soviet Union.
Things were very different then.

I have thought recently that what I should do
Is to take the painting down
As a reaction against the Russian invasion of Ukraine.
But it is comforting to hang on to ideals -
Visions of peace which transcend the current time.

For many years I was a peace activist
And my main preoccupation was to help break down
The cold war mentality that people held against Russian
And the countries of Eastern Europe.
Now, I am almost ready to believe that I,
Like so many other people, was duped.
Perhaps, as the phrase goes,
We really were "useful idiots"
And the hawks were the ones who were more realistic.
But none of us saw what would occur decades into the future.
In short, we misjudged Russia and were far too lenient towards the country,
While the lies told by American politicians and the Pentagon were so plain to see.

Going back to the picture,
I do wonder about the sweet little girl
And the artist who painted her.
Now they will both be in their mid-40s.

Many in this generation and those who are older than this
Have swallowed the insidious propaganda put out by the Russian media
As dictated by their political leaders.
They will probably believe that it is a good cause to fight against,
What they are told, are the fascists in Ukraine
And anyone who says otherwise or disagrees with the narrative
Is a traitor.

So what happened about their lesson on Peace?
Why has all of this been dumped
In favour of mass killing, and the destruction of
Schools, Hospitals, Homes and all of the infrastructure
By Russian indiscriminate shelling,
Despite their oft-repeated statement
That civilian buildings are not targeted.

What, in fact, were they taught about Peace?
Is it something that only they could enjoy,
Whereas other people were not given this right?

I still believe in Peace, myself,
But a ceasefire would let Russia get away with
Their invasion of a sovereign country
And their attempt to wipe the Ukrainian culture,
Identity and its entire population
Off the face of the earth.

Russians have, it seems, inherited the genes of
Genghis Khan and the Mongol Hordes
Which are reflected in their resort to brutality and savagery
In times of war, and even towards each other in normal times

Under certain circumstances.

They are slaves to deference towards their masters

And seem unable to comprehend individual freedoms

And the concept of democracy.

No-one should give any excuses for the behaviour of their armed forces.

Nor the evil dictates of their political leaders.

It is time the country faced up to reality

Or the moment of realisation by ordinary people

Will be catastrophic for the country.

To prevent that happening, there is nothing,

Absolutely nothing which the Russian government

Will rule out as it lashes out at other countries and its own people.

Genghis Khan was indeed brutal,

But even he did not have the means which the present leaders have

To get their own way.

A nightmare scenario is on the horizon...for us all.