WORLD LOSS AND REWORLDING: AN ARENDTIAN READING OF RUSSIA'S WAR AGAINST UKRAINE

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Abstract

Author develops an Arendtian account of war as driver of world loss, arguing that war destroys not only lives, territory, and infrastructure, but also the material and public conditions through which a common world can appear and endure. Drawing on Hannah Arendt's works, the article identifies two connected forms of war-caused world loss. First, war attacks the durable human artifice (infrastructure, homes, cultural sites, etc.), thereby eroding the material "in-between" that stabilises common life and links generations. Second, it damages the public world in which plural beings appear to one another through speech and action, replacing conditions of freedom with fear, necessity, and force. The actuality of this problem is demonstrated through selected testimonies, reports, and examples from the Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine. Its original contribution is the concept of reworlding, understood as an Arendtian analytical category for practices of different collective actions that resist world loss under conditions of war.

Keywords: Hannah Arendt; world; world loss; reworlding; war.

Introduction

There are concepts that each of us seems to be familiar with, but only until we encounter them in real life. Then they can show themselves in a completely unexpected way, turning our entire comprehension upside down. War is one such concept. Before you see it with your own eyes, feel it on your own skin, let it through your very soul, it is as empty as an idea of a unicorn or centaur. You have a description, a mental image produced by movies and books, you can imagine this creature, called war, but you will always fall behind in understanding the real phenomenon compared to those who met it in person. War is not only about stolen lives that will never see the light of day again, not only about the ruins of the cities that once were blooming and thriving, not only about the lost cultural heritage of generations before us that are impossible to restore, but it is a much deeper and complex phenomenon that changes human beings and societies. By attacking the material world, war simultaneously strikes the shared realm in which people live, remember, orient themselves, appear to one another, and act together. The destruction of a home is not simply

the loss of one's property but also the loss of the sacred space of safety and comfort, of familiar routines and cherished memories, of the hiddenness of your private life that once formed the basis of your known world and now vanished alongside the broken walls. In the same way, the destruction of a school or a university is not only the collapse of a building, but of a centre of someone's public life, the realm in which they meet others in their plurality.

Hannah Arendt gives us a powerful vocabulary to examine this kind of loss. In *The Human Condition*, she distinguishes three fundamental human activities: labour, work, and action. Labour answers to the necessities of our biological life. It produces goods that don't last, but are critical for our daily existence – the objects of consumption. "[T]hese things, Arendt writes, for incessant consumption appear and disappear in an environment of things that are not consumed but used" (Arendt 1998, 94). These "useable" and "reusable" things are the outcomes of work, that "guarantee the permanence and durability without which a world would not be possible at all" (ibid, 94). They constitute the worldly part of the world that has the potential to outlast their creators. These durable human-made artefacts surround us everywhere from the moment we're born until we have our last breath. They create that feeling of familiarity that makes us feel "at-home" in the world of known things. Action, in turn, occurs among plural human beings, and it always harbours the possibility of a new beginning, the creation of something fresh and unfamiliar. "To act, Arendt emphasises, in its most general sense, means to take an initiative, to begin, to set something into motion" (ibid, 177). It is thanks to action that the world changes, for better or for worse.

This paper develops the idea that war is a catalyst of world loss. It argues that war tends to destroy the world in two connected ways. First, it attacks the durable fabric of human artifice: homes, infrastructure, archives and monuments, etc. In doing so, it erodes the material "in-between" that sustains ordinary life and links past, present, and future. Second, when this ground is shaken, it damages the public world in which human plurality shows itself. It unfolds in the loss of orientation, common reality, common meanings, institutional trust, and political agency.

Sections 1 and 2 are respectively dedicated to each of these types of world loss. Yet, this world loss can be fought against. It is neither inevitable nor irreversible, and the reason is the presence of conscious others. The world, as Arendt sees it, is not a mere background for our existence; it is existence itself with all its plurality of objects, and contacts, and actions. The world is more than just a multitude of natural and artificial things. It is a web of countless connections between those things and people and people

with people between those things that they create or use. As Kattago highlights it, "for Arendt, the world is the space in-between people" (Kattago 2014, 59), like a table "located between those who sit around it" that "relates and separates men at the same time" (Arendt 1998, 52). And this very fact of sharing the world is what makes it possible to neutralise the war-caused world loss. The paper insists that different forms of collective resistance – from volunteering to public rallies, from joint mourning to documentation of war crimes – should be understood as forms of reworlding, meaning the efforts to preserve or remake the material and public conditions of a common world that tends to disappear under attack. This idea is presented in detail in Section 3.

Methodologically, the paper combines close conceptual reading of Arendt's political thought with a phenomenological reading of selected materials from the Russian war against Ukraine. Arendt's writings serve as the primary theoretical framework, particularly her accounts of worldliness, durability, plurality, action, power, violence, loneliness, and natality. The Ukrainian materials, such as wartime testimonies, diaries, media reports, documentation of cultural destruction, and examples of civic resistance, are read as situated traces of how world loss is experienced, narrated, and resisted in everyday life. The aim is not to offer a legal classification of war crimes, but to show how war attacks the material and public world and how different forms of collective action may function as reworlding.

1. War-caused world loss through the destruction of durability

For Arendt, we, as humanity, are the main architects of the world. All natural things – the Earth and its goods –, even if they can outlive us, will unavoidably perish one day without any chance of escaping such a fate. Yet the products of human hands, even if not absolute in their durability, can give these earthly materials new life. It is through work that humans fabricate the world by giving things form, significant permanence, and use. As a result, they become the "structure" of our existence – the known frame we learn growing up and get accustomed to. They not only organise our environment into a comprehensible system, building our understanding of the world itself, but also connect us with others. A good book can spark a conversation that can grow into a true friendship. A theatre can become an accidental meeting point of future lovers. In other words, the world is much more than a simple pile of objects available for our use; it is a mediator between its inhabitants and the thread that connects the past generations with the ones that are about to

come, and it is exactly this intermediate sphere that breaks first with a disappearance or decay of its material equivalent.

1.1. War destroys the material "in-between"

Arendt persistently insists that world "is not identical with the earth or with nature… It is related, rather, to the human artifact, the fabrication of human hands, as well as to affairs which go on among those who inhabit the man-made world together" (Arendt 1998, 52). When missiles target the peaceful cities, destroying apartment buildings, hospitals, schools, railway networks, and other life-supporting infrastructure, the resulting harm extends well beyond the financial costs of reconstruction. These objects form the material in-between of the common life of civilians, providing the physical foundations upon which social, economic, and cultural activities depend. Their destruction, therefore, breaks the ordinary arrangements through which a plurality of people share a world, leaving a void behind an unexpectedly vacant space.

Many Ukrainians felt in lived experience that loss of the usual space, of what Martin Heidegger called the feeling of "at-homeness" in the world, which characterises the everydayness of peacetime, causes the weakening (and frequently complete disappearance) of previous connections. Impossible conditions of life, forced displacement, occupation, and immigration became the prime causes of broken families and ties. Here are two examples from the written war testimonies from temporarily occupied regions in Ukraine – Donetsk, where most of the communications and infrastructure have been constantly destroyed since 2014, and Zaporizhzhia, which has been sharing the same fate since the beginning of the full-scale invasion:

- "It is very scary. Last year, there was no water supply for three months. They [Russians] also turned off the lights every day. It was very difficult psychologically and there were constant quarrels with my husband because there is no work [...] There is a lot of destroyed property near us. Communication and the Internet are a big problem now. Since July 2023, there is also no water supply. Could the [INSTITUTION] affect us? It is very far from us. My daughter left [the occupied territory], and I miss her very much. It is very hard on my soul and my emotional state is also upset. I want to go to my daughter, but I cannot leave my husband. Everything that was planted in the garden burned and disappeared because there was no water. There is no opportunity to meet with friends. Telephone connection is the only option. There are very high fees for communication but poor communication

quality. The connection was even lost when I answered this questionnaire" (see S.a. "Testimony 1600").

- "Now, I live alone in my house with a dog and a cat. I haven't seen my children and grandchildren for over a year. Apart from the store and pharmacy, I don't go anywhere. I communicate with a few people. The more time passes, the greater the gap between people. Once friendly neighbours, who shared everything among themselves, accepted the "Russian world". Now, we don't communicate at all. But many people are waiting for de-occupation. Now there are very few people left in our city, these are mostly elderly people" (see S.a. "Testimony 1595").

Beyond the fractured relationships, the attack on durability also alters the meaning of the very objects. In ordinary life, a school introduces children to the world, a power grid supports the rhythms of everyday life, and a bridge links neighbourhoods. In war, however, the same objects may become reclassified as shelters, strategic assets and evacuation routes. When they become military targets, the world seems to remain physically present, but it no longer appears primarily as a familiar, stabilising "common ground", but rather as a landscape of (for the most part) unpredictable, possible risks. "Try to imagine this psychological turn when your home – the sacred place of safety and comfort – can any moment turn into your grave" (Reva 2025, 70). Yevgenia Belorusets' description clearly highlights this transformation every Ukrainian remaining in the country has been living with for the past 4,5 years:

> The Russian attacks tend to begin at night in pitch black. The ground trembles underfoot; people begin to fear that their small houses with the narrow cellars they hide in will be destroyed any minute. During the shelling, they can't switch on a single light, there's no cell service, and they have to wait a long time, perhaps till the next day, before they can call someone to make sure their friends and relatives are still alive. (Belorusets 2022).

It becomes obvious that war pushes worldly objects back into the bonds of basic necessity and emergency, which are subordinate to the unequivocal logic of survival – the sphere Arendt prescribed to labour. In such a way, the world loses itself under the pressure of war.

1.2. War breaks continuity

Still, the intermediate sphere is not the only thing that crumbles under the ruins of the material world. The durability of things also helps keep the world more or less stable and

coherent in terms of temporality and historicity. It allows the projects of our hands to outlast our brief stay on Earth and to connect us not only with our contemporaries but also with those who were before us and those who will come after we are gone. In *Between Past and Future*, Arendt repeatedly returns to the topic of fragility of continuity, writing:

> [W]ithout tradition – which selects and names, which hands down and preserves, which indicates where the treasures are and what their worth is – there seems to be no willed continuity in time and hence, humanly speaking, neither past nor future, only sempiternal change of the world and the biological cycle of living creatures in it. (Arendt 1961, 5)

The human world needs such continuity because each new generation has to make sense of the place it arrives in before trying to renew it (which every generation eventually tries to do), and education, in a broad sense, plays a crucial role in it. Not only educational institutions, such as schools, colleges, and universities, but also libraries, archives, museums, and other historically significant buildings, such as churches, are spaces that preserve and pass on knowledge of the times. The destruction of such spaces and the treasures they maintain that happens in war does not only damage what exists now, but also what could be handed on. Information warfare has always been, and remains, one of the major weapons in armed conflicts. Today, Russian forces methodically destroy competing narratives on the occupied territories, burning books in the Ukrainian language on culture and history, classifying them as "extremist" literature. The disappearance of cultural artefacts also weakens the present connection with the past. If damaged with no repair, they become oral stories without concrete material form and can soon be transformed from genuine historical facts into doubtful myths, which are easier to manipulate or even dispute altogether.

Specifically, for this reason, Russia constantly targets historical buildings. Even those that are considered UNESCO World Heritage. Only a couple of months ago, on June 16, 2026, a Russian drone struck the historic Kyiv Pechersk Lavra, the eleventh-century monastery complex, which is still an active religious site today. As a sacred site with over a millennium of history, it occupies a central place in Eastern Orthodox Christianity, analogous in religious importance to St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican City for Catholics and Al-Haram in Mecca for Muslims. However, its significance is not limited to this alone. Its very existence is the direct evidence and connection with the Kyivan Rus' – the first East Slavic state that covered the most territory of modern Ukraine and Belarus, and parts of European Russia, and was governed from Kyiv. Since Peter the Great, who deliberately

changed the name of his kingdom from Tsardom of Muscovy to the Russian Empire in 1721 to create a fake continuity of regional Moscow roots with the ancient heritage of the Kyivan Rus', any ancient monuments on the territory of Ukraine were like a thorn in the flesh to Russia – a constant lingering source of annoyance and reminder of a stolen history. Overall, as of 15 July 2026, UNESCO confirmed 541 cultural sites damaged by Russia. Such attacks confirm the Arendtian viewpoint: culture is one of the powerful ways a world becomes durable enough to be inherited, making it a particular target in wars.

2. War-caused world loss through the destruction of the public world

Arendt relentlessly repeats in her writings that the world "can form only in the interspaces between men in all their variety" (Arendt, 1993, 33). Indeed, it is with the help of the durable fabric of human artifice that we pull the thread that links humanity through time. Yet, it is the presence of the public space that makes it possible in the first place. Arendt describes it in the following way:

> "The common world is what we enter when we are born and what we leave behind when we die. It transcends our life-span into past and future alike; it was there before we came and will outlast our brief sojourn in it. It is what we have in common not only with those who live with us, but also with those who were before and with those who will come after us. But such a common world can survive the coming and going of the generations only to the extent that it appears in public" (Arendt 1998, 55).

For Arendt, the world is the world of appearance, the world of speech and action, without which the human artifice would be "a heap of unrelated things to which each isolated individual was at liberty to add one more object" (Arendt 1998, 204). The destruction of the "in-between", that was discussed in the previous section, comes with the damage of the very condition under which the plural beings can appear as actors, and that is what we will be talking about in this section.

2.1. War replaces spontaneous (co-)action with force

In *On Violence*, Arendt draws a clear line between violence and power. For her, genuine power does not rest on coercion, but on common actions. Both Nazis and Bolsheviks, in her opinion, could rise to power because of their impeccable skills of organising the masses, of firing their imagination and fuelling their hatred, of making them truly believe the goals and glorious missions of the movements, of inclining them to voluntarily (at

first) participate, and propaganda plays a crucial role in it. As Arendt demonstrates in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the Nazis' effective employment of systematic propaganda secured the widespread public adherence to their ideology, fostering support for the persecution of Jews. Comparably, the sustained anti-Ukrainian de-humanising discourse advanced by Russian state-controlled media since Putin's rise to power in 2000 has played a significant role in generating public support for the invasion of Ukraine[1].

Modern Russia has one of the strongest propaganda machines in the world. Still, words have limits, and when reality becomes harsher, turning to violence becomes the easiest way to keep people in control and force them to do what the government wants. Violence operates through means and ends. It treats everything and everyone as instruments. First, the violence is directed at a fabricated external enemy that must unite the people within the country. For Russia, it was first the Chechen people, then Georgians, now it is Ukrainians. Yet when the picture of villainous foreign foes is no longer enough, the state adds the enemies within. "[W]ar", in its turn, as Arendt insists, "is still the *ultima ratio*, the old continuation of politics by means of violence" (Arendt 1970, 6).

Even in the defensive war (the one the country was forced into for its own survival), violence is inevitable. When a country is attacked, there is at first a wave of patriotism, caused by the unjust acts of the aggressor, that motivates the young men to enlist – a manifestation of true spontaneity that Arendt glorifies in human beings. However, as long as the war is dragging on, there are fewer and fewer people willing to fight and die for their country, and the moment comes when the forced mobilisation becomes unavoidable. The decision to use violent means in this case is typically justified by the urgency of the situation and the gravity of the cause, since the survival of the nation or country is at stake. In the same way, the fierce orders on the battlefield, the decisions of the military commands to go into risky brutal assaults that have a high chance of heavy losses, cruel drills in the training centres, the always present possibility to be captured and tortured by the invaders into forced cooperation or sent to the filtration camp (chiefly for civilians) for the same reason – all of these is the integral part of war reality.

[1] In April 2022, two months after the full-scale invasion began, the Levada Center conducted a survey to assess public support in Russia for the so-called "special military operation." The survey found that 53% of respondents expressed their full support. Among them, the most frequently cited justifications closely mirrored official state narratives: protecting the Russian-speaking population (43%), preventing an attack on Russia (25%), and eliminating nationalists, eradicating fascism, and restoring order (21%).

2.2. War compresses freedom and spontaneity

In *Between Past and Future*, Arendt insists that freedom is not merely an inner will, built by the strength of one's character, but a worldly reality that depends on the present socio-political conditions. To be free, human beings need a shared, politically organised world in which they can engage by words and deeds. She insists that "[w]ithout a politically guaranteed public realm, freedom lacks the worldly space to make its appearance" (Arendt 1961, 149). In times of war, this public sphere significantly compresses. As was already said, war damages worldly reality by making survival the dominant concern. Atrocious attacks on civilian infrastructure, vicious bombardments of peaceful cities, blackouts in the cold season, realities of occupation – all of them directly affect human ability to hold safe public assemblies and mobility in general. People start to filter their daily decisions by the likelihood of danger in their environment. Each choice becomes a negotiation with the possible peril: sleep through the air raid or go down to the bomb shelter, take a safer underground or faster train, etc.

Not only does military life become regulated by the needs of war. Civilians too are forced to follow the "new rules" dictated by increased safety requirements: curfews, limitations of martial law, such as restrictions on leaving the country for men and medical professionals, limits of public gatherings (both events and demonstrations), restrictions on freedom of movement (checkpoints and obligatory document inspections), etc. All of them, although necessary in such circumstances, physically limit the freedom of people. Needless to say, people are mostly willing to accept these rules without hesitation, since their lives are at stake. In such a way, a level of physical boundaries is added to the already made psychological adjustment to the situation. Nevertheless, even during the war, in a truly democratic country, the people are ready to disobey them in extreme cases, such as when the government or the country's leader makes decisions that are not only at odds with the people's opinion but also directly harm the country.

This was exactly the situation in Ukraine in the middle of July 2026, when President Volodymyr Zelenskyy unilaterally dismissed Mykhailo Fedorov, the Minister of Defence of Ukraine, from his position. In response to this decision, political rallies broke out across the largest (unoccupied) Ukrainian cities. At the time of writing this section, they have already been going on for two weeks. The most repeated slogans written on the protester's cardboard are "Shame!", "Hands off Fedorov", "Stop sabotaging victory!", "The Russians

are celebrating", as well as "Syrskyi out!"[2]. Many Ukrainians believe that it is thanks to Fedorov and his wise implementation of a new cyber and drone warfare policy that the country finally has an advantage over Russia on the battlefield. Indeed, such a decision could not have been viewed by people otherwise than as a direct threat to the country's defence capabilities in this war. These protests show that when national survival overrides the individual, people's spontaneity resurrects from under the pressure of war-imposed restrictions, making the reworlding possible again.

3. The ways to resist war-caused world loss: practices of reworlding

It creates an environment that makes the world unstable and fragile, attacking both the material and the public spheres. Obviously, to end the war would be the best way to stop the progressive world loss. Nevertheless, even during the war, there are ways to oppose and prevent it. We will further call them the forms of reworlding, meaning different practices through which people preserve, repair, or recreate the durable and public conditions of a common world amid the destruction caused by war.

3.1. Material reworlding: repair, rebuilding, preservation

Since we begin the paper by discussing the destruction of durability that war directly causes, the first form of reworlding we will examine is the material one. Indubitably, any restorations made during the war are undertaken amid the renewed threat of destruction, so the authorities frequently need to prioritise what to repair immediately, such as the energy grid, and what can wait until better times, like the façade of a local theatre. Many people do not wait for the government to fix their homes or businesses. If they have the financial means, they do it themselves. Some big companies have already restored their venues a couple of times. For example, McDonald's in Lukianivska (a downtown district of Kyiv) has been damaged seven times during the full-scale war. Others even had to rebuild everything from scratch, such as Bucha Gallery Epicentr – a hypermarket in Kyiv Oblast that was burned to the ground by Russian invaders in 2022. Despite the risks of repeating destruction, these efforts still matter because they resist reducing the world to

[2] Oleksandr Syrskyi is an unpopular former commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, known for his preference for outdated Soviet doctrine based on brutal training and operations with high casualties.

pure necessity. They proclaim, without even suspecting it, that the world is not only a battlefield or emergency zone, but remains a home to be maintained and handed on.

Apart from the obvious reconstruction of the damaged buildings (schools, hospitals, malls, residential buildings, etc.) and infrastructure (energy and water systems, bridges, roads, etc.), the material reworlding also includes preserving cultural and religious constructions and protecting libraries by evacuating their collections and digitising their archives and external and internal appearance. Naturally, digital copies cannot replace the original physical work, but they can serve as material for future repair work. Let us take the example of the St. Michael's Golden-Domed Monastery in Kyiv – the twelfth-century architectural treasure, whose dome is believed to be the first in Kyivan Rus' to be gilded. In 1937, on Moscow's command, the Bolsheviks blew it up with dynamite to clear the space for a new government administrative centre (which was never built). The historical significance of this holy site is enormous, so when Ukraine finally gained independence in 1991, the monastery was rebuilt, using preserved archival photographs, drawings, and detailed descriptions, to restore the place's ruined historical continuity. Today, there are three major digitisation projects in Ukraine – Skeiron, SUCHO and CyArk – that use 3D laser scanning, mobile technology, and web archiving to protect religious and cultural landmarks.

3.2. Public reworlding: action in concert

The second form of reworlding is public and political. In the previous section, we saw the example of the rallies against Zelenskyy's decision to dismiss Fedorov, which effectively illustrates people's spontaneity of acting in concert even in times of war. Aside from political protests, it also includes volunteering and organising mutual aid, creating emergency networks and neighbourhood self-organisation, wartime journalism and civic documentation initiatives (to record war crimes and war experience in general), local governance and collective resistance. All of these joint voluntary efforts show that the true political meaning of solidarity lies in its capacity to generate non-violent power even under violent conditions. Thus, one can say that in a way war fosters a unique form of ethical and political solidarity – the "solidarity of the shaken", as Jan Patočka calls it (see Patočka1996). One should remember, though, that not all wartime unity should be considered as a form of reworlding. Actions that arise from demands for obedience, such as military commands, do not fall under this qualification.

Besides restoring the public arena, the joint acts also play a significant psychological role on the individual level, breaking the feeling of isolation in one's own fear and grief. If left immersed in this state, one's chosen self-isolation from public life risks growing into loneliness – a state in which, Arendt believes, a person loses all connections with the world. Loneliness, she insists, is "the experience of not belonging to the world at all, which is among the most radical and desperate experiences of man" (Arendt 1973, 475). Thus, grappling together with the same anxiety and suffering (even if they are left undiscussed out loud) through assistance to others and joint work can actually have a beneficial mental effect. It not only reduces the stress of one's own situation, preventing people from withdrawing into themselves, but also creates bonds within the community. Bauer et al.'s empirical research suggests that "an external aggressor attacking a population already possessing a national identity might bond that entire population even more tightly together" which may help explain the case of exemplary Ukrainian military and civic resistance.

Conclusion

The main argument of the paper is that war can cause world loss through the destruction of two spheres: the durability of human artifice and the shared public sphere where plural beings can appear, speak and act together. Applying an Arendtian account helps us avoid two mistakes:

- The first would be to treat war-caused destruction as merely material and measurable by reconstruction cost. A destroyed home is not merely damaged property, and a burned library or monastery is not only a cultural-sector loss. These are attacks on the material and symbolic "in-between" that allows people to inhabit a world together, creating the temporal continuity between generations.
- The second would be to consider the resistance to this world loss as merely a military affair, since it concerns both the material and the public world, which are interconnected. Practices of repair, rebuilding, documentation, volunteering, mutual aid, protest, shared mourning, cultural preservation, and so on, should be read as practices of reworlding. They do not erase destruction, and they should not be reduced to mere resilience either. Reworlding under war is fragile, partial, unequal, and constantly exposed to renewed violence. It should be understood as an attempt to prevent war from having the last word over reality.

Yet, this fragility does not make reworlding politically insignificant. On the contrary, it shows that the world exists only where people continue to live and act together fully. Still, as Arendt highlights, the biggest "miracle that saves the world" (Arendt 1998, 247) is human natality itself, since each new life brings a new beginning, a new capacity for action and a new hope. Although war tends to destroy the world, it does not abolish the human capacity to remake it.

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