

Point Nemo

Scene from an unmade film

Phil Cohen

In memory of Mantas Kvedaravicius, documentary film maker, killed in Mariupolis, aged 43, by Russian Federation forces on April 4 2022.

The Long Room in Putin's Palace on the Russian Black Sea Coast. The room is furnished in the style of Louis XIV, with ornate gilt framed mirrors on the walls. At the far end there is a bigger than life size portrait of St Vladimir, the patron saint of Russia, holding a globe in his outstretched hands under the legend 'He made our world possible'. On closer inspection, the face of the saint bears a curious resemblance to that current President of the Russian Federation, who is sitting under it, at one end of a table that stretches almost the whole length of the room. About 40 metres away, at the other end of the table, sits General Sergei Shoigu, Russia's minister of defence and chief planner of the invasion of Ukraine. Between them, nervously clutching a collection of maps, is Professor Nicolai Sedrov, from the Institute of Cartographic Sciences in Moscow. He is an expert on toponymic mapping. Under the table, lying by Putin's feet is Pasha, a sheep dog and a gift from the Serbian President, Aleksander Vucic.

Putin: Welcome, gentlemen. We are delighted that you could find time to leave your front-line duties to come here to day to brief me on how well our special military operation in so-called Ukraine is going and how our inevitable victory can be best represented in the maps we make of it.

Shoigu: Thank you presidency,

Putin: (interrupting) Please call me Vladi, we are all friends here...

Shoigu: Yes, uh Vladi... Well, our glorious armed forces are making good progress, meeting some resistance from the neo-nazi militias, but overcoming them with our superior fire power, and receiving a warm welcome from the civilian populations who see us as liberating them from the oppressive yoke of Nato and the Western Imperialists.

Putin: As I expected (*Turning to Sedrov*). And how are our patriotic cartographers showing this progress to the world?

Sedrov: Yes your pres.. I mean Vladi, I have brought some maps to show you.

He starts to unroll one of the maps. He holds one end flat on the table with his hat but when he opens it out the hat slips and the map rolls up again and falls on the floor. As he scrabbles to retrieve it from under the table, Pasha joins in, and possibly thinking it is some new kind of

bone, makes off with the map between her jaws. Putin whistles and the dog instantly drops the map and stands to attention. Sedrov quickly recovers the map and opens it out, Putin and Shoigu move round to pore over it, while still maintaining 3 metres distance.

Sedrov: As you can see, Vladi, we have here used bold red arrows to indicated the advances of our armed forces on the ground, showing the key military installations and government institutions targeted by our tanks and missiles. You will notice that no residential centres or civilian sites, like hospitals, schools or cultural centres, are indicated because of course they are not targeted.

Putin: Good, red for the red army, and the image of unstoppable momentum conveyed by the arrows, yes I like that. But what are these stripey red and white areas?

Shedrov: They are where fighting is currently taking place and there is no overall ground control.

Shoigu: (interjects hastily) But of course even here our troops are making advances, Vladi...

Putin: Hmm... (to Sedrov) Perhaps you could add some small arrows to the red stripes showing the direction of advance? Like this? *He takes out a red felt tip pen to illustrate.*

Sedrov: Yes, of course. What a good idea!

Putin: I gather you are an expert in using maps to document place names.

Sedrov: Yes, that is correct. My major work was an atlas tracing the common Slavic origin of Russian and Ukrainian place names.

Putin: Splendid! What we need now is a new map of the Ukraine, getting rid of all street and place names that give credence to the myth that Ukraine is a separate nation and culture, and celebrating instead our common ancestry now that the country has been fully embraced into the bosom of Mother Russia.

Shoigu: Erm, if I might say something here, Vladi, how about we go one step further and actually rename some of the cities we have re-taken to mark the glorious sacrifices of our troops in liberating the country and perhaps also your inspiring leadership.

Putin: Hmm yes, well you certainly have a point there. As Napoleon once said ‘there where our map is there shall be our territory.’

Sedrov: Wasn’t it a British prime minister who said ‘Roll up that map of Europe, it will not be wanted these ten years.’

Putin: (bristling) Can I remind you that was after Napoleon’s victory at Austerlitz and Austerlitz was a Russian defeat!! One of the few we have endured.

Shoigu: (hastily) I am sure what the Professor meant was that your victory in Ukraine will be redrawing the map of Europe, and indeed the world, for *at least* the next ten years. It will be your historic legacy to the Russian people, to have at last restored our sense of greatness, after all the humiliations since 1989 and not least to have halted the onward march of NATO.

Putin: (preening) Yes, yes you are right.

Sedrov: Perhaps if I might make a suggestion, Mariupolis could be renamed Putingrad once it is fully restored to its former state.

Shoigu: And then we could claim the documentary film that bastard of a Lithuanian director made about the town is fake news. No wonder he committed suicide.¹

Putin: Good riddance! It's a good idea but I am not so sure about the grad bit, too reminiscent of Lenin or Stalin for my liking. How about Putinopolis? I remember as a child going there with my parents, back in the good old days. We had a dacha there, and I used to watch the big boats coming in and out of the port and wonder whether one day I would be the captain of such a ship...

Sedrov and Shoigu: (together) The ship of state!

Putin: (suddenly turning to Shoigu) Do you think at our next meeting we could have a sand map table made, you know like the one we used to have for our special military operation in Syria a few years ago. It's so much more fun to be able to move the tanks and missile carriers around, and plan how we are going to encircle the cities and destroy them without hurting anyone except the neo-nazi imperialists...

Shoigu: Of course, Vladi, it will be just like old times. We look forward to it.

Sedrov: And I will bring along a new set of maps showing Ukraine with all its new Russian place names!

Pasha: (wagging tail) Woof, Woof!

¹ Editorial Note: Mantas Kvedaravicius, the director of *Mariupolis (2016)*, a documentary portraying conditions of everyday life in the conflict zone, was killed by Russian armed forces while trying to leave the city on April 4 2022. For a fictional account of what life was like in the grey zones of the Donbas prior the invasion see Andrey Kurkov *Grey Bees* (2021). For a succinct critical analysis of how the Russian invasion has been represented cartographically see Debbie Kent 'Threads of War' (in this issue of Livingmaps Review' and Doug Specht and Alex Kent 'How maps tell the story of the war in Ukraine' in *Geographical* April 1 2022.