

OPINION COMMENTARY

'Horatius at the Bridge' in Ukraine

A 25-year-old soldier's sacrifice helps me realize at last why we read Livy's story in Latin class.

By Gregg Opelka

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Vitaliy Volodymyrovych Skakun, who was posthumously awarded the Order of the Gold Star after he died stopping a Russian tank column's advance in Ukraine.

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It's been almost 50 years since I've thought of Horatius at the bridge. As a student at Loyola Academy, a Jesuit high school in Wilmette, Ill., I was required to study Latin. My teacher for three of those four years was the mellifluously named Vito Volino. We called him "Magister"—Teacher.

Magister Volino, though not a Jesuit himself, had a love of Roman literature bordering on the sacred, and he inculcated it in his students—or tried to—with passion, flair and occasionally by hurling a blackboard eraser at recalcitrants. During my junior year we read the Roman historian Livy's retelling of "Horatius at the Bridge"—an act of military bravery in the sixth century B.C.

As Livy tells it, when the neighboring Etruscans, led by Lars Porsena, set their sights on Rome, Horatius Cocles stood alone atop the Sulpician Bridge against the approaching attackers while awaiting the Roman troops. When the Roman soldiers arrived, they destroyed the bridge to prevent Porsena's invaders from entering the city. Horatius, in full

armor, dived into the Tiber at the last second and somehow swam to safety, dodging enemy javelins all the while. His successful stalling of the Etruscans allowed Rome to fend off the attack and save the city. Horatius' story was recounted to the youth of Rome for generations as an example of Roman *virtus*, or bravery, in the pristine days of the pre-Republic monarchy.

Fast forward to last week in Kherson, Ukraine. A different soldier on a different bridge defended his country from invading marauders determined to take the bridge, city and everything else in their path. The story of Vitaliy Volodymyrovych Skakun, a Ukrainian battalion engineer who last week detonated himself along with the bridge outside the town of Henichesk, has gone viral. The 25-year-old's sacrifice has become emblematic of the Ukrainians' battle for freedom in much the way in 1989 the "Unknown Rebel" standing before a Chinese tank in Tiananmen Square came to symbolize the struggle against oppression.

In Livy's tale, Horatius survived the attack. Mr. Skakun was not so fortunate. He knew his detonation of the bridge amounted to a suicide bombing—yet he did it anyway, texting his intentions to his fellow soldiers in advance. The Roman poet Horace, a contemporary of Livy, wrote in one of his many odes: "It is sweet and fitting to die for the fatherland." (*Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori.*) It is difficult to imagine how Mr. Skakun's ultimate sacrifice, though it won him a posthumous Order of the Gold Star, can seem anything but bitter to his friends and family.

As teenage Latin students long ago, we thought nothing could be less relevant to our lives than the tale of Horatius at the bridge. We complained ad nauseam to Magister Volino about the meaninglessness of such moth-eaten legends. He knew better. He understood that like everything else he taught us, it was a lesson that in the end we would appreciate. Years later, I finally get the relevance of Livy's tale and have seen what Ukrainian *virtus* looks like.

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