Chinese President Xi Jinping speaks to the leaders of Germany, France, the European Council, and the European Commission via video link in Beijing on Dec. 30, 2020. During the meeting, the Chinese and European leaders announced the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI). Xinhua/Li Xueren via Getty Images

In addition to the crimes, the heroism, and the heavy toll in blood, the struggle for Ukraine may also come to represent one of the most strategically significant events of this century, or any other—the one that established China, not America or Russia, as the dominant power in Europe.

Most Western observers have taken Beijing’s professed readiness “to play a constructive role to facilitate dialogue for peace” as a sign that Ukraine is somewhere between a headache and a disaster for Xi Jinping, who announced a Sino-Russian partnership with “no limits” at the Beijing Olympics only last month. The assumption is that Xi is now in danger of looking complicit or credulous (or both), and that the Communist Party—having argued incessantly for the sanctity of China’s own territorial integrity—may now stand accused of hypocrisy. Xi’s support of Putin is also seen as having put Beijing at risk of igniting anti-Chinese sentiment in Europe, of squandering the many investments it made and trade relationships it built in the European Union, and of pushing otherwise friendly EU capitals closer to Washington.

Triangulation between Russia and Europe will no doubt require a degree of finesse for which China’s Wolf Warriors are ill-prepared, and providing Putin with liquidity to fund his war machine, for example, is not a cost-free decision. But anyone taking pleasure in China’s supposed bind probably has it backwards. In the wake of its partial expulsion from the global trade and

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financial system, Russia—with its vast supply of raw materials—is likely to become a Chinese economic dependency. That is a good thing for China, and if Xi can successfully position himself as the only world leader capable of restraining Putin, it will go a long way toward extending his hegemony all the way to Lisbon, as China starts to displace the United States as Europe’s most important global partner.

After all, would a seat at the European table really be too much to ask for the man who saves Europe from nuclear war? Reading the recent statement from the Chinese Foreign Ministry that promised “China’s mediation efforts for a ceasefire” in Ukraine, and the EU foreign policy chief’s concurrence that the broker of peace “must be China,” it’s not hard to see the request being made, and being answered in the affirmative—with Washington reduced to second fiddle on a continent it spent the better part of a century defining and holding together.

The last decade of Europe’s China policy has been schizophrenic, but on the whole, Xi has good reason to think that Europeans might prove receptive to his blandishments. Ever since China started sinking its neighbors’ vessels, sailing warships through international waters, flying sorties across the Taiwan Strait, committing genocide against ethnic and religious minorities, smashing freedoms in Hong Kong, and eliminating term limits for its “president for life,” the sum total of the European Union’s response has been a miscalculated investment deal and a suite of nonbinding policy instruments designed to give the appearance of concern about Chinese economic penetration. European willingness to overlook Chinese complicity in human rights abuses and other transgressions has long been based on structural weaknesses and economic incentives that might only grow with the loss of Russian trade, the struggle to recover from a pandemic-induced economic contraction, and the return of large-scale war on the continent. A shift away from Russian gas toward renewable, nonnuclear sources of energy would require even more dependence on China, which is by far the leading supplier of solar panels, lithium batteries, and various rare earth metals on which “green technology” depends.

In the absence of a widespread consensus on China, the EU’s policy in particular has for years been limited to serving as a tool for obtaining commercial contracts, making Europe an ideal target for a Chinese strategy that uses trade and investment to ensure economic and political dominance and collapse American security networks that don’t serve its interests. Five years of solemn EU debate about Europe’s need for “strategic autonomy,” for example, culminated in a prosaic, German-driven investment agreement with China that didn’t advance any European strategic priorities, other than to sweeten market access for a handful of blue chip firms.

While the 2020 Comprehensive Agreement on Investment was put on ice last spring by the European Parliament after China sanctioned a number of EU committees, think tanks, and academics, a revival of some version of it—perhaps with a broader set of European corporate beneficiaries—may be part of the price that Beijing exacts for “restraining” its Russian client from waging total war in Ukraine or beyond. A successful EU-China deal would in turn complement Brussels’ new and long-awaited Indo-Pacific strategy, which turns out to be little more than a scheme for maintaining European supply chain stability; the Global Gateway, a hypothetical European Belt and Road competitor that includes no new funding and which one EU official called “nothing more than a letter of intent”; and the EU connectivity initiative, which some in Brussels consider “a use of EU taxpayer money to further Beijing’s BRI ambitions in its zones of interest,” according to one knowledgeable insider.

In addition to its institutional weaknesses, the EU has also been a soft target for Chinese influence and coercion in recent years because of its dependence on the plurality of political and economic power that sits in Berlin, whose own China strategy has been accurately summarized as “What’s good for Volks-swagen is good for Europe.” When Angela Merkel became chancellor in 2005, China accounted for less than 3% of German exports; by 2020, it surpassed the United States as Germany’s largest trading partner. China’s share of German exports tripled during Merkel’s tenure, and Germany now accounts for 50% of all EU exports to China. In the past decade alone, fully two-thirds of total German GDP growth has come from exports; today they account for nearly half of its GDP. Crucially, exports support about 7 million German jobs, according to an estimate from the European Commission.

In public and especially in private, German officials have sometimes argued—often convincingly—that what might appear like the ruthless pursuit of German economic interests in China has always in fact been a deadly serious strategy for stability. According to many German elites, it is their duty to stave off the mass losses in manufacturing and economic dislocation that have rocked other advanced economies in recent decades, because the kind of economically driven populism that led to Brexit and the election of Donald Trump must be
avoided in Germany at all costs. As the engine of German growth and Germany’s biggest trading partner, China is not just a large and enticing market—it is a hedge, German officials are not above implying, against the return of German nationalism.

If Germany’s Russia policy has been driven in part by convenience, in part by guilt, and in part by lucrative bribes, its China policy has always been driven by corporate profits. (With China accounting for only about 9% of total German goods exports, it’s hard to believe the insistence that trade with China sustains the high German wages that come from the export of manufactured products.) In the wake of Russia’s bloody war in Ukraine, and the accompanying embarrassment for Berlin, subsuming relations with Russia into a larger framework of economic ties with China is likely to prove convenient for all sides—and to further strengthen Berlin’s ties with Beijing. While the United States remains stuck in a rhetorically fierce but militarily toothless anti-Russia policy, Germany can expand trade with China, and through China with Russia, while giving the appearance of straddling the global U.S.-China divide, in a more lucrative 21st-century version of the country's familiar Ostpolitik.

Berlin’s approach to China may make some sense for Germans, but it has never made sense for the EU as a whole. As in the case of the bloc’s sovereign debt crisis and its monetary and energy policies, however, no countervailing bloc has ever been able to mount an effective challenge to German preferences. Paris, keen to disguise German economic supremacy as a Franco-German partnership, typically avoids open spats with Berlin, including over China policy. Countries like Italy, Austria, Spain, Portugal, and Greece tend to follow the German lead (or in the case of Hungary, to run ahead of it).

The EU members of Northern and Eastern Europe have historically worried most about Russia, and therefore placed greater value on relations with the United States and NATO. But their hopes that greater alignment with U.S. China policy might buy them greater protection from Russia have now, of course, been dashed. If Washington won’t allow NATO to transfer Polish MiGs to Ukraine, the chances that it will send its own fighter planes or Patriot missiles to shoot down Russian jets over Riga or even Warsaw must be reckoned as low.

So where is resistance to Chinese overtures for diplomatic predominance over the Ukraine crisis going to come from? Probably not from Germany, which recently authorized a major Chinese acquisition in the Port of Hamburg, where Chancellor Olaf Scholz cut his teeth as mayor. Not from France, which has inked at least $45 billion worth of Chinese deals since 2019, including $15 billion for national champion Airbus to supply China with 300 jets. Not from smaller countries like Hungary, which hides Chinese infrastructure investment from Brussels by using shell companies that borrow from Chinese lenders, or Greece, which has given China a 35-year lease on Europe’s largest sea port. EU elites in general have been happy to watch the continent’s technology, design, production, revenues, and profits shift significantly to China—just as American elites have been made incredibly wealthy and satisfied by their own 20-year offshoring orgy.

In reality, Europe is a fragmented continent increasingly distrustful of the reliability and sanity of the United States, unhappily but helplessly dependent on German economic interests, destabilized by serial crises, eager to diversify away from fossil fuels, and terrified by the return of Russian imperial power and the prospect of a nuclear exchange. Far from being strategically autonomous, Europe needs a partner and protector. And if the answer isn’t Washington, then Beijing is the only other game in town.

Another reality is that America’s own China policy, insofar as one exists, has been a model of insincerity. In the course of haranguing EU officials and European capitals to reduce ties with Beijing, Washington has overseen a stampede of U.S. business into China, including in regions distinguished for the widespread use of slave labor and internment camps. Nor has the Biden administration’s yearlong quest to form a strategic partnership with Europe against China found much success. The president’s Marvel-like calls for a trans-Atlantic “alliance of values” to fight “global autocracy” fell flat in Europe over the past year as he imposed a nonsensical pandemic travel ban on EU citizens, bungled a withdrawal from Afghanistan that wasn’t coordinated with NATO, announced a trilateral security pact with Australia and the United Kingdom at the expense of France, and left Lithuania twisting in the wind after it confronted China over recognition of Taiwan with American encouragement. Why align with an erratic, hypocritical power that doesn’t hesitate to stab its friends in the back?

Putin’s war in Ukraine has done little to make Washington appear any more sincere or reliable even to its most ardent allies in Europe. To date, the White House is reportedly obstructing the transfer of combat aircraft to Ukraine via NATO’s eastern flank, refusing to transfer air defense systems or other weapons that might give the Ukrainians a fighting chance, and distancing itself more generally from military aid provided to Ukraine by Poland—all while working hand-in-glove with the Kremlin to conclude a nuclear deal with Iran on terms that might allow Russia to further augment its power in the Middle East. It’s hard to imagine why, when push comes to shove, even those European states and leaders inclined toward familiar American security arrangements would trust Washington to protect them from the slavering wolf on their doorstep.

If all this sounds like a catastrophe for Xi Jinping, rather than a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, he has a highway in Montenegro to sell you.

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Russia’s New Exiles

As Vladimir Putin methodically destroys the remains of Russian civil society, a new group of emigres flees the country, only to find themselves frozen out of Western life

BY IZABELLA TABAROVSKY

A 4

n express train stands at Finland Station in St. Petersburg, Russia, on March 8, 2022, before departing for Helsinki. Finnish Railways has expanded its train service from St. Petersburg to Helsinki to accommodate the increasing number of Russians leaving their country. Stringer/picture alliance via Getty Images

While the world’s attention has been riveted on Ukraine, where Russian forces are visiting death, displacement, and destruction on the Ukrainian people, another kind of destruction has unfolded in Russia, virtually unnoticed. Within the first days of the war, the Russian government smashed to pieces whatever remained of Russian civil society—including independent media, human rights organizations, and anybody who could still speak truth to power and to their fellow citizens. As the Kremlin adopted a new draconian speech law and cracked down on organization after organization—initiating or completing bogus legal procedures against them, shutting down their websites, and sending goons to physically harass them—the people staffing those organizations picked up and left the country. Within only about 72 hours, the entire institutional fabric of Russia’s civil society, painstakingly woven out of the post-Soviet institutional wasteland, was irreparably torn to shreds.

The drama of these developments is incomparable to the tragedy unfolding in Ukraine. But the two are intimately related. As Vladimir Putin’s would-be blitzkrieg sputtered, the Kremlin realized that its immediate survival depended on its ability to maintain the big lie it told its people: that Russia was engaged in a “special military operation” to liberate Ukrainians from Nazis and end the “genocide” of Russian-speaking people in that country.

Russia’s swiftly adopted speech law, effective retroactively, prohibits the use of the word “war” to describe the “special operation” and forbade journalists to use any sources but official ones to report on it. Failure to comply could lead to up to 15 years in prison. Dozens of independent media across the country have been shut down. Some announced they were closing on their own in recognition of the fact that under the new regulations, there is not a word of truth they can speak or print for their readers. Russians’ access to Western social media has been cut off, too.

The total number of Russians who have left the country is hard to estimate, but Russia’s leading economist Konstantin Sonin, now at the University of Chicago, has floated a figure of 200,000. Most are now sitting in the Eurasian “near-abroad” of countries that used to be part of the USSR, with others heading to Turkey and Israel. (European Union countries and the United States are closed to Russian passport holders without visas.) Among this group are independent journalists, lawyers, and academics—the intelligentsia who made it their life’s work to oppose Putin’s regime. They are watching the unfolding horror in Ukraine and trying to process the destruction of their world. “Sometimes I text my friends: Where are you?” said Anna, a well-known independent journalist who is now in Tel Aviv who asked me not to print her real name. “They text me back: I’m in Baku, I’m in Egypt, I’m in Tashkent.”

With foreign airlines cutting off flights to and from Russia as part of an unprecedented sanctions package, and airfares shooting through the roof, many would-be political emigres have had to grab whatever flights they can. Some fled because of credible threats to their life and freedom. Others left on the assumption that it was only a matter of time before they heard a knock on the door. Many had opposed the regime publicly for years, and couldn’t possibly wipe out every social media comment, article, or broadcast that could now lead to criminal charges.

But many left quite simply because they “could no longer breathe inside Russia,” in the words of Sergey Parkhomenko, a prominent independent journalist who had established a home outside of Russia several years ago. Among those who left in recent days are also high-tech professionals and scientists. Opposition to the regime may not have been their raison d’être the way it was for the intelligentsia, but they still like to have the freedom to express their political opinions as they see fit and not to feel fear over every publicly available comment. Some report having signed collective letters against the war in Ukraine or attending antiwar rallies. Others simply realized that they couldn’t continue practicing their professions, or that the departure of foreign companies foreclosed their professional hopes for the future.

The abruptness of the departure is striking. In some cases, barely a few hours passed between the decision to leave and finding oneself on an outbound plane. Anna, who left with her children, handed the keys to her apartment to her mother. She also asked her mother to pass on her bank card to a friend who couldn’t leave because her brother had just been jailed for 30 days. (His crime? Having walked out of a metro station when a protest was happening nearby.) Anna wanted her friend to be able to use the last month of her salary, which she expected to be deposited into her account. She herself would not be able to access it from abroad. With the central bank having imposed limitations on hard currency withdrawals, Anna barely managed to pull some cash...
out of an Israeli ATM before Mastercard and Visa imposed bans on Russian citizens trying to use their cards abroad.

Tens of thousands of Russians in similar positions now find themselves in Georgia, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan. But the city that seems to be shaping up as the main center of this new wave of Russian emigration is Istanbul. Kirill Rogov, deputy director of the Liberal Mission Fund, a Russian think tank, arrived in Istanbul via Baku. “There are quite a few people here,” he told me, referring to friends and people from his circle. “Every day I meet someone else. Just today, new people have arrived. I’ll be calling them after we finish.”

To Kirill, like for many other Russians with a sense of history, this all feels eerily familiar. Many of today’s exiles talk about the “Philosophers’ Ships” that the Bolsheviks used to deport dissenting intellectuals to Europe and Turkey, which also put me in mind of Mikhail Bulgakov’s play Flight, with its description of White Army officers—remnants of the old Russia—boarding the last boats from Crimea for Constantinople in a chaotic and desperate evacuation. Some would stay, others would eventually make it to Paris, London, and Berlin. Like Bulgakov’s characters, who feel as if they are sleepwalking through the collapse of their old life (the play is written in “dreams” rather than scenes), some of today’s emigrants report failing to catch up mentally and emotionally to the their new reality. “It’s as if you’re spinning on your axis and the picture you see around you catches up to you with a delay,” Anna said.

The recent destruction of Russia’s human rights organizations and independent media marks the sudden culmination of a 20-year-long campaign by Putin’s regime to muzzle, undermine, and intimidate Russian civil society. On Feb. 27, 2015, Boris Nemtsov, the charismatic and popular opposition leader, was murdered in cold blood outside the Kremlin walls. Nemtsov had openly supported Ukraine’s 2004 revolution and traveled to Kyiv to speak to the protesters, famously linking their struggle for freedom with Russia’s. On the eve of his murder, he was working on a report titled “Putin: The War” and preparing for a massive anti-government and antiwar rally planned for March 1. This rally became a memorial march for him. Five years later, Alexei Navalny, another charismatic and fearless opposition leader, survived a chemical nerve agent poisoning but was arrested in January 2021 upon returning to Moscow from Berlin. Navalny is slated to serve another 15 years behind bars.

Over the last several years, countless organizations have been designated “foreign agents,” a punitive label with strong connotations of treason. Among them was the Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers of Russia (later renamed into the Union for the Committees of Soldiers’ Mothers of Russia), a venerable NGO that acquired a national reputation during Boris Yeltsin’s war in Chechnya when it set out to help distraught Russian mothers wandering Chechnya’s mountains in search of their sons—a campaign that drew more sympathy from the Chechens their sons had been sent to kill than from Russia’s leadership. On the wave of public outrage generated by these women’s stories, Nemtsov gathered a million signatures on an antiwar petition and personally delivered it to Yeltsin.

“Russia’s human rights defense movement began with the opposition against Yeltsin’s war in Chechnya,” Parkhomenko told me. In addition to his work as a journalist, Parkhomenko is also a founder of several influential civil society projects, and spent the first days of the current war in Ukraine trying to get his wife, their five children, and their families out of Russia. His wife, Varya Gornostayeva, heads Corpus, a publishing house that is about to release a new book about Nemtsov, The Successor (Preymnik). It remains to be seen if the book still comes out. The author, Mikhail Fishman, a star Russian reporter and anchor of TV Rain—the last independent TV station in Russia—who led the channel’s broadcasts covering the first days of the invasion of Ukraine, was forced to flee the country shortly after the station was shut down.

One of Parkhomenko’s projects, Last Address, commemorated victims of political repressions by attaching a memorial plaque to the last house where the victim was seen alive. He worked closely with International Memorial—another crucial voice the Russian government squashed in the first days of the current war. Memorial was best known for documenting the history of Soviet political repressions, but no less important was its human rights division, defending today’s Russian citizens against today’s repressive state. In 2014, Memorial became the first Russian civil organization to designate the invasion of East Ukraine and annexation of Crimea as an act of aggression. On Feb. 24 of this year, on the first day of the new invasion, Memorial issued a sharply worded, three-sentence statement: “The war that Putin’s regime has unleashed against Ukraine is a crime against peace and humanity. This war will remain a shameful page in Russia’s history. We are against war with Ukraine and demand an immediate end of the aggression.” Four days later, in a decision that was widely expected, Russia’s Supreme Court denied Memorial’s appeal to reverse a lower court decision to shut it down.

Americans often take the thickness and longevity of their institutional culture for granted, but from the Russian point of view, it looks absolutely extraordinary. The New York Times started publishing in 1851. The New York Stock Exchange was founded in 1792. The Bank of New York was established in 1784 and counted Alexander Hamilton among its founders. In Russia, by contrast, revolutions and radical regime changes have ensured that little institutional culture survives from one political system to the next. Each one wipes out the culture that preceded it. The 1917 Bolshevik Revolution and the 1991 dissolution of the USSR marked the most radical breaks with the past. The few civil society institutions that could be viewed as having survived these, if any, are the exceptions that prove the rule. By and large, there isn’t a shred of

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institutional culture dating back to the 18th, 19th or even early 20th centuries that broadly influences contemporary Russian life. When it comes to Russia’s civil society organizations, the oldest of them had barely crossed the 30-year mark before they were shut down.

The now-destroyed Memorial, vene- rated for the measure of justice and honor it conferred on victims of Stalin’s repressions, was founded in 1989. So was the original Committees of Soldiers’ Mothers. (It appears to still operate, but in a limited way.) Radio Echo of Moscow, a freewheeling independent radio station, was founded in 1990, and shut down in the first days of the current war. Novaya Gazeta, the legendary, multiple-award-winning newspaper whose roster included six investigative reporters murdered in the line of duty, including for the sin of honest war reporting, was founded in 1993. (Its editor-in-chief, Dmitry Muratov, the recipient of the 2021 Nobel Peace Prize, has made the choice to comply with laws against reporting on the current war so that the paper can stay open and report on the coming economic catastrophe.) Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty opened its Moscow bureau in 1991 on an invitation from Boris Yeltsin—as powerful a sym- bol of the Cold War’s end as could be. It closed the bureau a few days ago due to the targeted harassment of its journalists and the organization as a whole.

Since launching his war against Ukraine, Putin has finally “canceled” the 1990s, whose liberal legacy he has always openly disdained. To an outsider, such a wholesale destruction may seem senseless: These groups had already been pushed into a corner, serving a relatively small audience. But from the point of view of a regime facing an exist- tential crisis, the crackdown makes perfect sense. The further Russia got bogged down in Ukraine, the deeper the economic crisis, the more likely people would be to turn away from their nor- mal television channels and seek out independent news sources. In the first days of the war, the number of visits to the BBC Russia site tripled before au- thorities blocked access to it. Having told a monstrous lie, the regime could not afford a shred of truth to reach its loyal audiences. Which is why the de- struction had to be total.

In her recent analysis of the contents of Russian official propaganda, analyst Olga Irisova noted that Putin’s regime rests on three legs: economic stability, lies, and fear. Irisova and her husband, Anton Barbashin, both 32, run the ana- lytical site Riddle, whose goal is to de- liver in-depth Russia analysis with the help of up-and-coming independent Russian scholars. In 2014, they left Rus- sia for Warsaw to run the project from there. (They relied on foreign fund- ing, and with the foreign agent laws in force could not operate the site in Rus- sia.) From there they moved to Vilnius, which in recent years became another center of Russia’s political emigration. When I spoke to them recently, they were in Berlin, where Irisova is doing a one-year German Chancellor Fellow- ship at the Alexander von Humboldt Fund. Barbashin is doing a Ph.D. at the University of Glasgow. The couple splits their time between the two cities.

“Every day, I open social media and see more posts from friends: I crossed the border at such and such a place, I’m safe now,” Barbashin told me. Riddle’s three remaining editorial board members left Russia within days of the start of the war (Thailand, Turkey, and Hungary). One of Riddle’s contributors fled to Kazakhstan. Although Irisova and Barbashin have lived in Europe for eight years, they are only now coming to terms with the idea that their exile status is permanent. “For the first few years, I used to say that I’m temporar- ily working outside Russia,” says Anton. It’s still hard for him to think otherwise. For Olga, the realization started to dawn two years ago. Their last trip to Russia was this January, right on the eve of the war. They used to travel to Russia four times a year. Now they don’t know when they’ll be able to visit again.

From their own experiences, they know that the war is starting to tear families and friends apart. People ac- cuse each other of being victims of prop- aganda (Putin’s and Western). Cut off from alternative sources of information, the majority seems genuinely unaware of the horror in Ukraine. “Sasha, why are you so upset? You sound as if the world has crumbled,” someone said to one of Olga’s girlfriends. “But the world has crumbled,” Olga said; Sasha’s friend just hasn’t realized it yet.

Most Russians seem unaware of the looming economic disaster facing them. Russia has now surpassed Iran and North Korea as the most sanctioned nation in the world. These sanctions, which numbered over 5,500 as of press time, will hit ordinary Russians especially hard. After Russia was removed from the SWIFT system, the ruble plunged to a record low value of less than one U.S. cent. Nearly 400 compa- nies have withdrawn from Russia as a result of state sanctions or voluntary boycotts. Among the latter is McDon-alds, whose arrival in 1990 was a major symbol of the end of communism, with people queuing for hours at its flagship restaurant in Moscow to get a taste of America, and which is closing all 847 of its restaurants across the country.

Still more consequential is the boy-cott by high-tech giants and manufac- turers. Apple, Microsoft, Intel, Dell, Adobe, Cisco, and countless others have announced an end to cooperation with Russia. The announcement by Boeing and Airbus, whose planes make up 70% of Russia’s civil aviation fleet, that they would freeze the delivery of spare parts will ground many of Russia’s domestic flights—a devastating development for a country of almost 7 million square miles.
and 11 time zones. Analysts predict that carriers might cannibalize parked planes for parts. “Technologically, Russia is about to enter a catastrophic state. It won’t get a single computer, a single microchip. It will gradually descend into literal darkness,” said Parkhomenko. His countrymen have yet to comprehend the implications of this, he added.

Putin has taken Russia in the direction of economic isolationism, Rogov said, yet Russia’s economy is deeply dependent on imports. It will take five to seven, maybe 10 years for Russia to become self-reliant. The process would require massive restructuring, primarily in consumption and manufacturing. Entire industries might stop for lack of imported components. Toyota’s plant in St. Petersburg recently announced that it is suspending operations because it lacks the necessary parts.

I asked Irisova whether the impending economic crisis would be enough to cause a collapse of the regime. For Americans, who view the economy as paramount, the answer may seem obvious. But in Russia, the answer is far less clear. Irisova pointed out that the Iranian regime has sustained itself through the sheer power of ideology and repression. In Russia, she believes, the belief in the fiction of Nazis in Ukraine may serve the role of a unifying religious creed. “Many are truly ready to come together when they hear the words Nazism and genocide,” she said. “Many will be willing to tolerate economic difficulties in the name of fighting Nazis.”

Propaganda will also do its best to explain the collapse in ways that are consistent with the recent past. Putin has already stated that he views economic sanctions as a declaration of war. Russia’s federal channels will inevitably present economic difficulties as evidence of Western “Russophobia” and an aggressive attempt by the West to bring the country to its knees. As the economic situation gets worse, says Irisova, some men may conclude that the only way to improve things at home is to grab a weapon and go fight the Nazis in Ukraine. It’s one reason she questions the wisdom of placing such a heavy sanctions burden on ordinary Russians.

Alexander Etkind, a well-known Russian public intellectual and history professor at the European University Institute in Florence, on the other hand, is in favor “of all possible sanctions”—particularly ending purchases of oil and gas. “I’m in favor of having this regime experience a full economic catastrophe, because all the other catastrophes have already visited it.” He gives the regime no more than a few months. But if it lasts another year, he said dryly, “it will outlaw people with an IQ above 80. Those with a higher IQ will be either in the camps or abroad.”

In the meantime, though, many Russians live as though nothing of consequence has happened. I asked Kirill Rogov what we know about how the average Russian thinks of the war. He explains that it is genuinely hard to know. Measuring public opinion in a country where people have limited sources of information and repressions are rife is a complicated exercise. “Even before the war, in the 2010s, we saw that people were afraid to speak their minds in opinion surveys,” he said. “It’s not necessarily that they are afraid of punishment, although such fears are also present. They are afraid because they can’t tell where the median of the generally accepted range of opinions lies. When people can’t feel it, they prefer not to say what they think.” Right now, he believes, most people are “lying low and waiting.”

In part, that’s because nearly a decade and a half of fruitless collective action has done its work: Opposition to the regime has produced nothing but broken lives—emigration as a best-case scenario, imprisonment as the worst-case. Conscription-age young men are particularly wary of going to antiwar protests: A faction in the Russian parliament recently proposed a law that would send men caught at nonsanctioned antiwar protests to take part in the “special operation.”

To be sure, not everyone follows their fears: Some 15,000 people have been detained in antiwar protests since the invasion began. Still, one of Anton’s friends probably expressed a widespread feeling when he said that he was waiting for the anti-regime sentiment to grow more before he joined. The contradictions in this logic are obvious, but it is also a logic that is hard to argue with. Not everyone is cut out to be Alexei Navalny.

The biggest unknown at the moment is the impact that information about dead Russian soldiers may have on Russian public opinion. The Russian government spent the first week of the war pretending there weren’t any. But even in the absence of independent coverage, numbers started to seep in. The Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers was reportedly overwhelmed by phone calls and emails from worried parents who lost touch with their sons. Information spread that commanders were tricking conscripts into signing contracts to join the “special operation” in Ukraine, which is illegal.

Hiding the true number of “killed in action” is a long-standing Soviet and Russian tradition. In the summer of 2014, when an independent politician in the city of Pskov, Lev Schlossberg, and local reporters discovered that local servicemen had been killed in Ukraine and demanded explanations from top military authorities, they were told that it was a state secret. Families of the KIA were found to have been intimidated, paid large sums of money, and forced to sign nondisclosure agreements. Soon after, Schlossberg was severely beaten, as were the other reporters.

This time around, things are much worse. In contrast to 2014, when a relatively small number of mostly professional troops was deployed, an estimated 190,000 troops are taking part in this
This will determine Russia’s future,” he said. A desire for distance from Russia altogether may be an understandable reaction under the circumstances, but it is a mistake, he said: “It is precisely what Putin wants.”

What makes the current sanctions regime against Russia unprecedented is that it is accompanied by voluntary private boycotts. Some of these appear to be a combination of reactive over-reach and the kind of self-aggrandizing virtue-signaling that has become the hallmark of corporate America in recent years. On the day Russia’s watchdog kicked the Echo of Moscow radio station off the air, YouTube also blocked its channel. According to Parkhomenko, a long-term contributor to Echo, the station called upon its highest-level contacts abroad and succeeded in reversing the YouTube ban, allowing the channel to live for another 24 hours before finally being blocked by the authorities.

The decision by Visa and Mastercard to boycott Russia has turned out to affect only those Russians who use their cards abroad. The first victims of the ban, which Visa loudly proclaimed was tied to its “values,” were therefore Russia’s new political emigrants, who left the country only to find themselves with no access to money. Estonia’s Tallinn University announced that it would stop accepting applications from Russian and Belorussian passport holders at about the same time as St. Petersburg’s State University announced it would expel 13 students who have taken part in antiwar protests. TikTok’s decision to stop uploading new Russian content has left those covering antiwar protests feeling abandoned and isolated. European countries and the United States have cut off new visas to Russian passport holders at just the time that people fleeing Putin’s regime need them.

Barbashin challenged the West’s apparent desire to freeze the Russians out completely. “Right now it looks like this: ‘We’ll separate ourselves from you, you depose Putin, and we’ll talk to you then.’ But you can’t just introduce a thousand sanctions, step aside, and wait for the problem to solve itself.”

No one I talked to among new Russian political emigrants is complaining about their situation. They are the first to say that their troubles can’t compare to the catastrophe in Ukraine. They insist that whatever help is available must go to Ukrainian refugees and the people inside Ukraine first. Yet even during World War II, the world knew the difference between Marlene Dietrich, Albert Einstein, and Hannah Arendt, and the Nazi regime—just as in Soviet times, the West understood the difference between Andrei Sakharov and Natan Sharansky and the KGB.

The fate of Russia’s new political emigres should concern the West. The storied institutions that they built in Russia may be gone, but they are the carriers of that institutional memory. They have the energy and creativity to build something new. At a time when Russia is turning into a black hole, impenetrable to the outside eye thanks to the peculiar combination of Putin’s repressive tactics and Western boycotts, their ideas, skills, and knowledge of Russian society will be needed now more than ever.

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Crypto, Conflict, and Crowdfunding

What the marriage of social media and digital currencies means for freedom, America, and the Jews

BY DROR POLEG

Every technological revolution is a double-edged sword, and the Jews often find themselves cut by both sides. The crypto revolution will be no exception. It will undermine traditional laws and political regimes and enable new ones. It will transform finance, media, and law. And it will provide social movements—and angry mobs—with new ways to organize and monetize. You may not care about crypto, but crypto cares about you.

Consider recent events in Ukraine. President Volodymyr Zelensky has become a social media star. Zelensky started the month of February with around 400,000 Twitter followers, on par with the prime ministers of Somalia and Australia. By early March, he was inching toward 5 million followers and poised to overtake Tucker Carlson and the pope. Millions on social media across the world added the Ukrainian flag and #StandWithUkraine to their profiles.

Twitter has long been a powerful force in politics, especially in the hands of professional entertainers like Zelensky—and Donald Trump. But while Trump used social media to fund his own election campaign, Zelensky’s Ukraine is using it to fundraise for a nobler cause: resistance to tyranny.

In the early days of the war—and even before it officially began—popular crowdfunding and payments platforms such as PayPal and Patreon blocked fundraising efforts run by Ukrainian NGOs, for fear that the money would be used to finance weapons and military activities in violation of their terms of service or U.S. laws. However, unlike traditional crowdfunding platforms, crypto addresses do not require anyone’s permission.

On March 1, the government of Ukraine tweeted a request for donations in cryptocurrency and included two Ethereum and Bitcoin addresses allowing individuals to transfer money directly from their crypto “wallet” to the Ukrainian government. Within days of its call for crypto donations, the country collected close to $50 million in various tokens.

As David Gauvey Herbert pointed out in a 2019 Bloomberg investigation, Ukrainian organizations have been crowdfunding for anti-Russian military activities since at least 2014. These efforts were focused mostly on current and former Ukrainian citizens who immigrated to other countries. Early on, there were concerns that funds raised overseas might end up in the wrong hands. In 2015, Congress included an explicit ban on U.S. aid to Ukraine from going to the Azov Battalion, an organization founded by a white nationalist and sporting a flag with insignia that suspiciously resembles that of the SS’s 2nd Panzer Division. Justifying the ban’s renewal in 2018, Rep. Ro Khanna, D-Calif., said, “white supremacy and neo-Nazism are unacceptable and have no place in our world.”

Despite these concerns, Ukraine’s crowdfunding efforts were not unprecedented or unique. They echoed earlier efforts by small, troubled countries to tap into wealthy immigrant communities in the United States. Starting in the early 1970s, the Northern Irish Aid Committee (NORAID) raised millions for the Provisional Irish Republican Army and Sinn Féin. Further back, in 1948, Golda Meir famously gave an “unscheduled, unannounced... and unannounced” speech at the General Assembly of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds in Chicago and raised $50 million for the Haganah, the predecessor of Israel’s Defense Forces.

What’s happening online today is different, however. Ukraine is raising money based on social media posts, in the middle of a full-scale war, from people who have no historical affiliation with (or even much knowledge of) the country. On March 1, the Ukrainian government also tweeted that it is planning an “airdrop”—a cryptocurrency term for awarding tokens to people who contributed to a campaign. Airdrops are often used by cryptocurrency projects to reward their early customers and most active contributors. The tokens users receive can be converted to cash or kept as souvenirs that can be sold in the future.

But these tokens are not just souvenirs; they are financial products. By giving supporters free tokens, crypto projects are incentivizing these early supporters to recruit more people to the cause—if demand for the token goes up, so does its value. Those who “invest” early have an incentive to keep touting the project on social media.

In this case, the project is war. For the first time in history, then, a country’s military budget is dependent on the quality of memes its supporters can produce, fueled by a token-based incentive scheme that keeps them engaged. If Trump weaponized social media to contest a domestic election, Ukraine is weaponizing it to buy weapons to kill its enemies.

Needless to say, Ukraine needs and deserves all the help it can get. But the mechanism it has pioneered is terrifying. Both social media and cryptocurrencies have been hotbeds for unwholesome activities. The former has been an efficient medium for the spread of hatred and lies (as well as love and truth), and the latter is used to finance various...
crimes (as well as harmless frivolity). The combination of the two presents a dangerous possibility: an online mob with a shared bank account.

Then there’s Russia. Two weeks before the invasion of Ukraine, the Russian government made a significant policy U-turn: Instead of banning crypto, as many feared it would (and as China did last year), the Kremlin published a document that outlined a framework for regulating cryptocurrencies. The document also mentioned that Russian residents own more than 12 million crypto accounts (one person can have multiple accounts), valued at more than $26 billion. That same week, Russia also reached a 30-year deal with China to provide natural gas—settlements for which will be done in euros instead of U.S. dollars.

A few days after Russian forces began advancing into Ukraine, the West imposed some of the harshest financial sanctions in history: Multiple Russian banks were kicked off the SWIFT messaging system that facilitates international money transfers, and Russia’s central bank was barred from accessing billions of its foreign-currency accounts held by international banks. In parallel, governments across the world started seizing or talking about seizing assets of Russian oligarchs or other people who allegedly made their money with Vladimir Putin’s help or blessing.

In the short term, crypto offers the Russian economy and Russian nationals an alternative financial system and a place to store wealth and transact. In the longer term, the unprecedented sanctions against a major commodities exporter might expedite the U.S. dollar’s decline as the preeminent reserve currency. It seems likely that the main challenger to the dollar will be a digital currency managed by a large country (or adopted by a large country). Which brings us to China.

Ever since the 2007-08 financial crisis and the aggressive, inflationary response by the U.S. government and Federal Reserve, pundits have been predicting that the Chinese yuan will become a true competitor to the dollar. And yet, 13 years later, the yuan only accounts for 2% of global foreign exchange reserve assets and less than 4% of international money transfers.

This is by design. China accounts for around 18% of global GDP, but it has a closed capital accounts policy, restricting the flow of money in and out of the country for both corporations and individuals. Even Chinese leaders are barely allowed to leave the country, let alone make free money transfers, especially after they retire from office. For the yuan to become a global currency, China would have to liberalize its capital account—a political nonstarter for a country seeking to increase rather than limit its control over its own citizens and bureaucrats.

But Central Bank Digital Currencies (CBDCs) offer a new approach. Digital money can be easy to use for anyone, anywhere; at the same time, it can be programmed and controlled in a way that enables the issuer (the government) to control each person’s permissions and rights. When all cash is replaced by digital money, the government can impose specific restrictions on each individual person.

Last year, China started piloting its own CBDC, the e-CNY, or digital yuan. According to the South China Morning Post, “government data showed 261 million digital wallets had been opened, and transactions totaled 87.6 billion yuan (US$13.9 billion) by the end of December [2021].” China also operates the Cross-Border Interbank Payment System (CIPS), which is used by major banks such as Citi and HSBC to settle yuan transfers. A 2022 report by CITIC, a Chinese state-owned investment firm, says that “it is necessary and urgent to vigorously promote yuan internationalization, especially the development of the CIPS system and the digital yuan.”

In the battle for money’s future, then, two diagonally opposed ideological camps are pinning their hopes on digital money: Crowds that wish to avoid traditional government restrictions, and bureaucrats that are trying to build the most powerful governments the world has ever seen. And these bureaucrats are not exclusive to China. In February, Canada invoked anti-terrorism laws to freeze the accounts of peaceful domestic protesters and anyone who provided them with financial support. Whether or not you agreed with the protesters, the swiftness with which they lost access to their own money was alarming.

A world in which crowds are empowered and private property can be confiscated without due process does not bode well for minority groups, including Jews, or small countries like Israel, which can be cut off from international financial systems (some have already suggested that the sanctions on Russia should also be applied to the Jewish state). More importantly, individuals and small groups may easily lose their property and other rights if they simply happen to find themselves on the wrong side of a trending topic on Twitter.

Jews have been here before. In 1748, Montesquieu published The Spirit of Laws which, in turn, inspired America’s founding fathers and the basic structure of all liberal democracies. In his book, the French political philosopher credited Jews with the emergence of moderate governments and civilized societies in early modern Europe. How did the Jews achieve this feat? By popularizing financial products that were resistant to tyranny.

For centuries, kings, princes, and
popes banished Jews from their lands and confiscated their property. Property rights were dependent on military power, which Jews always lacked. To untangle this dependence, wrote Montesquieu, “the Jews invented letters of exchange” that substituted physical property with virtual obligations. Thanks to this method, “commerce ... became capable of eluding violence, and of maintaining everywhere its ground.”

In light of this innovation, the economic cost of tyranny increased significantly: It was still easy for rulers to banish and imprison people, but it became much harder to seize their property. Tyrants faced a dilemma: Respect the rights of all people, including Jews, or see trade and economic activity move elsewhere. To keep their economies humming, “it became necessary that princes should govern with more prudence than they themselves could ever have imagined.”

According to Montesquieu, tyrants did not suddenly decide to honor the rule of law and separation of powers. These conventions took root only when tyranny became a losing economic strategy, particularly as finance and commerce overtook agriculture and local crafts. As he put it, “though their passions prompt them to be wicked,” it was in the interest of rulers to be “ humane and virtuous.”

For the record, Jews in the Middle Ages did not invent letters of exchange, which have been around since antiquity. But medieval Jewish traders and bankers played a role in popularizing such financial instruments. In any case, the dynamic described by Montesquieu did not turn all countries into liberal democracies. And new innovations such as fiat currencies and the internet helped rulers take back the power they originally lost, and then some.

Fiat money—money that is not directly convertible to a specific commodity and can be printed at will—first appeared in China in the 11th century. But most currencies on Earth, including in China, remained connected to one commodity or another for the following millennium. But in 1971, President Richard Nixon ended the convertibility of U.S. dollars to gold. Ever since then, and for the first time in history, all of the world’s major currencies are fiat currencies.

The fiat system means governments—particularly the U.S. government—have the power to increase spending without increasing taxes. This mechanism helps finance wars, pay for bank bailouts, and fund other government programs that those in power deem worthy. Whatever the merits of such programs, the important point is that fiat currencies give governments the power to confiscate value out of people’s savings by printing more money.

And then there’s the internet. As payments move online, and bank accounts are nothing more than digits in a database, it becomes easier than ever to freeze anyone’s account and prevent individuals, groups, or whole countries from participating in economic life. This power, too, is often employed for causes most people would agree with, but the point is that governments once again have the power to confiscate people’s property at will. And this time, they don’t even need to use violence.

The prevalence of fiat money and the remote control offered by the internet undermine the “balance of power” that occupied Montesquieu. It is no longer possible for minorities to prevent rulers from confiscating their property. In other words, the cost of tyranny is diminishing. Which means we will see governments exercise their powers more aggressively over time.

But the erosion of liberal democracy and individual rights is not a foregone conclusion. Cryptocurrencies offer the United States and its allies an opportunity to introduce a new form of money that enshrines these ideals and makes it difficult for any government to revoke them.

Why should the United States willingly undermine the current system and replace it with a new one? Because it is in America’s long-term interest to do so. Or at least, it might be. Its share of the global economy has diminished significantly over the past several decades—from 40% in 1960 to around 20% today. This is not bad news; it is a testament to America’s success in rebuilding Europe and Japan and bringing China into the global economy. But it does mean we’re heading into a multipolar world in which the United States will no longer reign supreme. In such a world, is it better to have a currency controlled by someone or a currency controlled by no one?

The U.S. government should have been working on digital solutions that balance the dynamism of digital money and the promise of American values, but it’s been conspicuously absent from this debate. The war in Ukraine may have prompted a new approach: On Wednesday, President Joe Biden signed an executive order that “lays out a national policy for digital assets across six key priorities: consumer and investor protection; financial stability; illicit finance; U.S. leadership in the global financial system and economic competitiveness; financial inclusion; and responsible innovation.” It is mostly a call for various authorities to explore if and how cryptocurrencies can be regulated or incorporated into U.S. policy, which isn’t much. But it’s a start.

Jews, meanwhile, are looking at a future in which crowds and tyrants—neither of which have historically been friendly—are leveraging financial innovation to increase their sway and undermine whatever is left of world order. The United States is starting to take digital money more seriously, but it would do well to take a long-term view rather than focus on immediate political and geopolitical considerations.

Do you know any Jews who work in finance or government? If so, tell them this: Promoting monetary solutions that ensure the rights of all participants at all times is in America’s interest. And it’s also good for the Jews.
THE SCROLL

THE REST

➔ Ukraine “must admit” that it won’t join NATO, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said Tuesday, a remark that touches on one of Russia’s key demands and could be an outline toward a cease-fire. Ukraine’s potential entry into the U.S.-led NATO alliance, which was originally established to counter the Soviet Union, has been a major grievance for Russia. Kyiv agreeing not to enter NATO is one of the terms of the cease-fire proposal that Moscow has floated—though the Russian deal also includes more maximalist demands like the complete demilitarization of Ukraine.

➔ Former New York Governor Andrew Cuomo misled the public by not reporting the COVID-19 deaths of 4,100 nursing-home residents, a newly released audit from the state comptroller found. In some months, Cuomo’s administration underreported nursing home deaths by as much as 50%, as the governor sought to sell himself as a model of pandemic-era leadership—going so far as to pen American Crisis: Leadership Lessons from the Covid-19 Pandemic, which fetched a $5 million deal.

➔ The White House was in a very charitable mood Sunday, turning the other cheek after Iran fired 12 missiles that landed near the U.S. consulate in Erbil, a Kurdish city in northern Iraq. No Americans were injured in the attack, which was carried out by Iran’s Revolutionary Guards who were supposedly targeting Israeli “strategic centers” in the area in retaliation for recent Israeli strikes inside Syria. The U.S. government response to the attack could be summarized as “no harm, no foul,” with Iran’s claim that the American consulate wasn’t a target of the attack treated as credible.

➔ Calls for violence are out of bounds only if you’re hurling your threat at improper targets, says Meta Corporation, in a new clarification of its hate speech policy for Facebook and Instagram users that allows those on the platform to call for the death of Russian soldiers or public officials. The temporary policy change, which Reuters reported based on internal Meta emails, specifies that users cannot coordinate the deaths of Russian soldiers or leaders but can freely and publicly post ill wishes.

➔ Though the overwhelming majority of American Jews responded to a Ruderman Family Foundation survey in 2020 that they identified as “pro-Israel”—8 in 10, to be precise—along with two-thirds who said they felt emotionally attached or very attached to Israel, the USA director of Amnesty International told a conference group on Wednesday that the feelings and beliefs of the poll respondents didn’t jive with his conception of what it means to be Jewish. “I actually don’t believe that to be true,” Paul O’Brien said about the survey, explaining that for the Jews who’ve failed to properly understand their own existence, or for those who didn’t agree with his view that Israel “shouldn’t exist as a Jewish state,” he was optimistic they’d come around.

➔ Have you heard the one about what happened to the teenager who went off to college? It goes something like this: They come in as kids and they leave as maladaptive adults who weren’t taught to think critically or communicate clearly and now suffer from a lack of curiosity. That, at least, is the conclusion of a new 10-year, 400-page study of postsecondary education in the United States written by two Harvard researchers.

FROM THE BACK PAGES

At the bottom of the steel steps at the El stop, I saw five people counting the change out of a white styrofoam cup. Their clothes were ragged, one was barefoot, and their movements as they thumbed the coins in their hands were exaggerated and slow, in the way of opioid users who have to lug around the weight of their habits. A block up, a woman walked past me, and I overheard her say to her companion, “He was 13 months sober, what else could I have done?” To describe what has happened to Kensington is to speak in terms of the apocalyptic. Last year, the Pennsylvania Attorney General Josh Shapiro estimated the neighborhood’s drug market is “approaching a billion-dollar enterprise,” with drug corners worth $60,000 a day and some premium blocks earning the dealers a cool million per week.

“The laws that govern drug sales, use, and acceptable behaviors on streets, in park spaces, and even on private property in the rest of Philadelphia very purposefully do not apply here,” a longtime Kensington resident wrote recently. “Here on the block where I live with my wife, drug dealers herd people deep in the throes of addiction like cattle toward the promise of a small amount of free drugs, in hopes that they’ll come back for more.”

—Sean Cooper

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The administration’s horror over Putin’s war is not merely performative, but functional—in the service of realigning with Iran.

The Obama administration alumni—many of whom helped to create the Syria playbook—now in charge of the Biden administration currently pose as staunch defenders of NATO and the trans-Atlantic alliance against Russia’s barbaric aggression in Ukraine. But in 2012 and 2013, it was NATO’s other members who pressed Obama to join, and lead, the European and regional states opposed to Assad’s butchery in Syria. Instead, Obama fended them off by turning to Russia, and using its veto power-by-proxy at the United Nations and other international forums in which the administration claimed to place stock. Anyone who wants something in Syria, the Obama administration told U.S. allies, should go talk to Putin.

In August 2012, Obama made the blunder that he has since repeatedly said he regrets most of all out of every decision he made as president, when he boxed himself in by laying down a red line against Assad’s use of chemical weapons—a line Assad would cross repeatedly, all the way to a major chemical attack in August of 2013. Again, Obama turned to Russia to bail him out of a commitment he had no intention of keeping, as the rest of his presidency demonstrated quite clearly. At the time, Obama was on the verge of clinching the interim agreement with Iran, known as the Joint Plan of Action, which was signed in November 2013. There was no chance he would jeopardize that breakthrough by targeting Iran’s client in Damascus. He had now signaled that, for all the moralizing rhetorical barrages against Russia’s support for the brutal Assad, Putin remained his principal partner in the Syrian arena.

That Putin fully understood Russia’s importance in Obama’s Iran calculus could be seen by the fact that the Russian dictator immediately pressed his advantage by seeking compensation in Ukraine. In early 2014, he took the first small bite of the sovereign nation, invading and annexing Crimea. The United States’ reaction was rich in rhetorical...
condemnation and otherwise pointedly feeble. Aside from a profound historical critique from then-Secretary of State John Kerry about how “You just don’t in the 21st century behave in 19th-century fashion,” which must have sounded like a compliment in Moscow, the administration leveled some sanctions against individual Russians, froze the assets of a handful of Russian government officials in the United States, and canceled their visas—in other words, the kind of response that makes for palatable headlines, but has precisely zero effect on the calculations of Vladimir Putin.

Putin would continue ingesting additional amuse-bouches extracted from eastern Ukraine in return for his services in Syria well into 2015. But the main dish would be served to him later that year. As Obama drew closer to finalizing his deal with Iran, he was faced with a problem: His prospective Iranian ally and future candidate for Middle Eastern hegemony simply couldn’t get things under control in Syria. Assad and the Iranians were being bled badly, and were in danger of actually losing the war.

But first things first: In June 2015, Obama officially got his deal with Iran. Now it was time to protect what Obama called Iran’s “equity” in Syria. The following month, the commander of the Iranian forces, the late Qassem Soleimani, went to Moscow for help. At some point in 2015, an Assad go-between and Obama’s regional point man, Robert Malley (who is currently in charge of the Biden administration’s talks with Iran in Vienna), informed the White House that the Russians were preparing to intervene directly in Syria. And in September 2015, shortly after the Iran deal was done, the Russian military went into Syria.

Putin was now the protector of the equity Obama promised the Iranians.

Moreover, in addition to safeguarding its base on the Black Sea, Russia was gifted with a long-sought strategic asset: a base on the Mediterranean, directly on NATO’s southern flank, and on the border with Israel.

Team Obama sought to cover its acquiescence to—indeed, its satisfaction with—Russia’s intervention by initially presenting it as a stupid decision on Putin’s part, which Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken asserted would result in a quagmire for Russia. But that was just more “strategic messaging.” In no time, the Obama administration was coordinating with the Russians as they bombed opposition-held areas to dust in order to help Assad crush his enemies and win his war. Simultaneously, in one of the more grotesque examples of the Syria playbook, Samantha Power performed arabesques of moral outrage at the U.N., “shaming” the Russians for doing exactly what Obama had contracted with them to do, in support of the Iran deal.

Obama’s realignment policy took a hit in the Trump years, during which the United States withdrew from the Iran deal and facilitated the transition of the much-admired Soleimani back to the spirit world. But once Team Obama was back in power in the form of the Biden administration, Iran was back at the front of the line. Not coincidentally, so was Ukraine—the currency in which Iran’s Russian protector liked to be paid.

The Biden administration came into office with immediate gifts to both Iran and Russia. It removed sanctions on Iranian clients and stopped enforcing sanctions on Iranian oil exports. It also waived sanctions on the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline between Russia and Germany. Putin’s dependence on Ukraine’s energy infrastructure was Kyiv’s insurance policy against a further invasion. Russia needed that infrastructure to move gas to Europe, and Moscow couldn’t risk it being damaged or sabotaged. The purpose of Nord Stream 2 was to give Russia an alternative route, one that kept the same amount of gas flowing to Europe but eliminated its dependence on Ukraine. Once the pipeline was physically completed, Putin concluded that it was a fait accompli that the Europeans

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Album of the Week

Urvakan Records

Urvakan Records is less a label and more an Armenian festival based around “interest in revitalizing the country’s abandoned and deserted sites and their ambiguous state of being neither completely ruined, nor truly alive as they were decades ago.” To that point, ‘urvakan’ means “ghost” in Armenian, and the group’s main interest is in music it describes as “hauntological.”

Fittingly, a collective memoir is less an album than a “sound research project” commissioned by the Urvakan, asking artists from Armenia, Georgia, Russia, and Ukraine to “explore how ‘collective memories’ could be embodied in sound by using some of the aural techniques capable of evoking such memories in the subconscious of people from locations fairly different, but some ways similar, in their cultural code.”

Released less than 24 hours before Russia’s attack, a collective memoir feels like specific memories discovered in the midst of a fog. The project’s goal, through sounds that aren’t particularly pleasant or even particularly musical, is to offer a unification of memory. Taken as a whole it is a startling soundscape. Sadly, some of the artists involved in the project have now had to flee from Odessa. The past is never just the past.

—David Meir Grossman
would eventually activate it, now that Biden had given it the green light.

As the talks with Iran entered their final stage, Putin began his preparations to move on Ukraine. No more amuse-bouches. Now it was time to Syrianize Ukraine—to consume it whole, as Russia's main course at the Iran deal banquet.

Underneath all the anti-Putin rhetoric, and even the slew of sanctions that followed the Russian dictator's invasion (which have increased only somewhat in severity as the fighting has dragged on), the posture of the Biden administration toward the Russian military operation has remained more or less the same—sanctions, sure, but nothing that puts friendly countries in an awkward spot, let alone starts World War III by giving the Ukrainians too many weapons, a policy that recalls Obama's posture toward Moscow in Syria.

Looking back at the Syria playbook tells us that the denunciations of and sanctions to combat Putin's aggression, combined with the solicitation of Russian aid and guarantees for Iran, is par for the course for the Obama-Biden realignment dance. And once the cynical two-step of this dance is seen for what it is, the moves are easy to spot. Even as the administration was slapping sanctions on Russia, it was simultaneously setting up a sanctions evasion haven for Putin in Iran, as it prepared to lift sanctions on Russia's Iranian client.

How does that work? The Russians are the guarantors of the Iran deal. Moscow would receive Iran's excess enriched uranium and exchange it for natural uranium. Per the deal, it would also be involved in nuclear and scientific cooperation projects with the Iranians. Naturally, the administration said it was “weighing” sanctions on Rosatom, Russia's nuclear power supplier and uranium producer. Only it knows it won't sanction Rosatom, because the Iran deal is more important. “We would of course not sanction Russian participation in nuclear projects that are part of resuming full implementation of the JCPOA,” a State Department official soon clarified. Rosatom reportedly has a $10 billion contract to expand Tehran's Bushehr nuclear plant.

This is to say nothing about the prospects of selling arms to the Iranians once the Biden administration decides to revoke, or just not enforce, a Trump-era executive order that blocked arms sales to Tehran. Obama's 2015 deal allowed arms sales after October 2020, and locked it into a Security Council resolution. The Trump administration invoked a snapback mechanism to reverse the U.N. resolution, and locked that in with the executive order. As part of what it calls a “rapid return to mutual compliance” with the deal, the Biden administration will want to permit such sales as quickly as possible. As Iran's main arms supplier, the Russians will be allowed—even required—to sell arms to Iran, in order to fulfill the terms of the deal. And so it goes.

Moscow, already familiar with the Syria playbook and no doubt fed up with having to play the administration's sanctions games while its soldiers are dying in Ukraine, decided to make a point of exposing the administration's double-game publicly for all to see. At the 11th hour, as the Biden team got ready to announce the conclusion of the deal with Iran, the Russians threw a wrench in the works. They demanded the United States announce written guarantees that its sanctions on Russia will not impede “our right to free and full trade, economic and investment cooperation and military-technical cooperation with the Islamic Republic.” In a line that deserves a place in the annals of Soviet humor, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov added, “We need guarantees that these sanctions won’t affect the regime of trade-economic and investment ties embedded in the [nuclear deal].”

Ridiculous, right? But it only took a few days before the Russians declared they were satisfied with the written guarantees they received from the Biden administration. That is to say, they've made their point, and everyone understood it.

As was the case in Syria, all the moral outrage about the horrors of Russia bombing civilian neighborhoods is just the lead in to the Iran deal. The American horror at Putin's aggression, in other words, is not merely performative, but functional—all the more so after the instrumentalization of Vladimir Putin in domestic American politics since 2016.

For the Biden administration, unlike for Obama, there are necessarily two Putins. There's Vladimir Putin, the realist head of state. He's a stone-cold killer, to be sure, but he gets the job done in rough spots like Syria, where he helped keep America out of another Middle Eastern war while holding in check the U.S. allies and their domestic neocon lobbyists who wanted to drag us into that conflict and spoil the Iran deal. He's a thug, yes. But it takes a thug to ruthlessly pound Islamist terrorists like ISIS and keep the Israeli Air Force grounded.

Then there's “Putin,” the devious monster who hacked our elections to install a puppet in the White House in an all-out assault on American democracy that even some Republicans deplore. Clearly, no compromise is possible with that kind of hell spawn. But if Putin was instrumental in neutralizing pesky U.S. allies of old with his entry into Syria while Obama conducted the real business with Iran, “Putin” is equally useful toward the same end: browbeating U.S. allies put in danger by the Iran realignment into keeping their mouths shut while the 2.0 deal is sealed.

Sure enough, the administration has
weaponized moral outrage over “Putin” in a messaging campaign against the Gulf Arab states and Israel. How can these countries be real U.S. allies when they don’t denounce “Putin”? While it’s perhaps unsurprising that the Gulf Arab states side with the authoritarian “Putin,” underscoring their incompatibility with American values, how can Israel call itself a democracy while it enables “Putin”? Like “the Palestinians” and “settlements,” “Putin” is a cudgel masquerading as a principled American stand on values that is meant to keep a downgraded Israel preoccupied and on the defensive as the administration gives nuclear weapons capacity to its enemy. If, with its faux outrage over “Putin,” the Obama-Biden crew manages to trip the Israelis into crossing a line with the actual Vladimir Putin, whom Obama helped install on Israel’s northern border, thereby complicating Israel’s ability to operate against Iran, then all the better.

That is to say, the administration’s moral outrage really isn’t about Ukraine at all. It’s another tool in the service of its deal with Iran. Which is the common thread between the timing of Russia’s decision to invade Ukraine, and the U.S. reaction to it. It’s all pegged to the realignment. That’s the lesson of the Syria playbook.

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COMMUNITY

A Taste of Persia

The markets of Pico-Robertson bring the flavor of home to LA’s Persian Jewish community—including those who’ve never been to Iran

BY EMIL STERN

As Nowruz, the Persian new year celebrated on the vernal equinox, approaches on March 20, the traditions of Los Angeles’ Persian community are very much on display at the Persian Jewish markets of Pico-Robertson. Fleeing persecution, Jews left Iran en masse around the time of the fall of the shah in 1979 and over the years that followed. Large numbers of them—estimates vary wildly from 30,000 to 70,000—moved to LA. The community in LA has held onto its traditions extremely well, with many of the next generation’s members speaking Farsi and making Persian foods at home—with foods they buy at stores that cater to the community’s tastes.

Crowded with excellent produce, very fresh nuts, and people, these markets are the best places to buy necessities for Persian Jewish culinary staples like ferrous ghormeh sabzi (an herbed meat stew), springy baghali polo (dill rice with fava beans), and mellow, alliaceous gondi (meatballs made with chicken and chickpea flour, colored gold with turmeric). The main stores are Glatt Mart (the biggest and most ecumenical-feeling), Elat Market (the oldest and most Persian-feeling), and Pico Glatt (open since the early 1990s, moderately Persian feeling). Together, these markets evoke an Iran I’ve never been to, not to mention an Iran to which their Persian shoppers will never return.

Pico Boulevard, where these markets sit (a few others are scattered around greater LA and the Valley) is not exactly Fifth Avenue, but then Fifth Avenue can’t compete when it comes to torshi, olives, and dates. The Rotab Jumbo dates at Elat are juicy, dense, and taste like dark butterscotch, while the Jumbo Israeli Fresh are spectacular. Along with other local Persian hubs like Eliass Kabob—or Elia’s, depending on which version of the sign you believe (its food is, per its website, “very Special, to steal all your hearts”)—and Le Palais Bakery, with its baklava and faloodeh, these markets preserve for their shoppers something that no longer exists. (Elat, too, sells pillows of baklava, pinched at the top like dumplings.) This makes them somewhat poignant places to shop, if you stop to think about it. But most marketgoers are there to focus on the food, and the food is great: refreshingly sour, copiously herby. For Nowruz, they’re looking for special holiday foods, including smoked whitefish and green rice.

Fariba Rabizadeh explained the uses and meanings of various traditional ingredients to me on a relatively quiet Sunday at Elat Market. She is a licensed marriage and family therapist who left Iran in the chaos of the night before the shah’s fall. She and two siblings joined the other two who were already in America; Rabizadeh would spend one night in New York before traveling to LA, where she has lived ever since. She has raised her family here and cooked a lot of khoresh (stew, the centerpiece of most Persian family meals, of which there are many varieties) in the intervening years. At Elat Market, she stopped and chatted with many acquaintances in Farsi in between giving me the low-down on different Persian foods.

These markets represent social hubs for Persian Jews in LA, as much as places to shop. Rabizadeh told me that when she first came to the city as a teenager, she placed more of a premium on fitting in. As the years have gone by, though, she has become more invested in Persian culture and education, even writing a book for therapists called How to Treat Iranian Clients.

On this Sunday, Rabizadeh was at Elat Market to educate me. I told her I had seen shoppers spend minutes digging through mounds of cucumbers to find the perfect one, holding specimens up...
to the light to be sure. What were they looking for? Here is what she told me: Too fat is no good (it means seeds, un-wholesome in a salad). Soft is no good. What you want in a cucumber is: tall, symmetrical, straight, and a darker green in color. This kind of cucumber is all but guaranteed to be sweet and crunchy. Rabizadeh was generous with insider knowledge, which I will share here with her permission: Pomegranates should be round, unblemished, and flat-topped (glossy, unblemished fruit is favored as in Persian culture, as it is often put on display). When shopping for pickled garlic, look for the darker, more heavily fermented variety. Good tomato paste is a staple of Persian stews. Tap a watermelon with your knuckles for a nice, hollow sound. A good eggplant is dark, hard, and straight; don’t waste your time with the soft ones. As for rice, Rabizadeh told me real Persian home cooks favor white, long, basmati. Aahu Barah was her tip for one of the finest brands; favor white, long, basmati. Aahu Barah, a sour yogurt) to hold its own. I like its undertasteful, not to mention its flair, its posters trumpeting coming Persian musical events like Shahram. Against Glatt Mart’s potato room, Elat Market has what I can only describe as a walk-in bread closet. If there’s a better place to buy one of the three major Persian breads—sangak, lavash, or cholo kabab (and nearly everything else), and purple borage flowers can be made into a tea to calm the nerves. When you’re sick, there are sweet lemons or nurat, a hard candy sometimes flavored with saffron to soothe your stomach.

The nuts at Elat Market are exceptional. I met shoppers who came from downtown just for the lemon almonds. I’m also personally indebted: Bringing Elat’s roasted hazelnuts to my girlfriend played a decisive role in our courtship. Jack, the man behind the nut counter at Elat Market, is brisk, helpful, and to the point. I knew I had made it in his eyes when he told off a Persian woman in Farsi for cutting in line ahead of me, although we’re not quite at the point where he acknowledges me when I pass him in the street.

Glatt Mart may be the 600-pound gorilla, the largest and most mainstream of the markets. It tends to smell more like bleach and meat juices than Whole Foods does, but it also has delicacies like rows of lamb tongues on Styrofoam trays. Elat Market sells reliably fresh fish, the counter managed by a kind-eyed man who promises to “look after you.” Elat does a brisk trade in salmon heads. I asked a woman next to me what she was planning to do with them, and she said, simply, “chop them and grill them.” Glatt Mart has a dedicated onion and potato room, which may account for its market leader status—it’s hard to beat an onion and potato room. But Elat Market, right next door, is not one to be cowed. Elat Market knows it’s got the halva and the kashke bademjan (a side dish made with eggplant and kashk, a sour yogurt) to hold its own. I like its undertoggar spir-it, not to mention its flair, its posters trumpet coming Persian musical acts like Shahram. Against Glatt Mart’s potato room, Elat Market has what I can only describe as a walk-in bread closet. If there’s a better place to buy one of the three major Persian breads—bar-bari, sangak, or lavash—in LA, I don’t know it.

Walking with Rabizadeh through Elat Market, it became almost impossible to find a section that was not resonant with meaning for her, or Persian culture as a whole. She paused at some rose water syrup. When someone dies, she told me, mourners at the cemetery pour rose water on their loved one’s grave and say a blessing on it; Persian kohanim also use rose water to wash their hands before making the blessing.

Rebecca Rabizadeh, Fariba’s daughter and a licensed clinical social worker, remembers accompanying her mother to these markets as a child and being bumped into by other shoppers and their carts. She prefers to shop at Trader Joe’s these days. It is, in her words, a vacation from the community. Eli Shavalian, a college counselor at Shal-hevet high school, also tends to shop at Trader Joe’s, but will be going to Elat Market to buy Nowruz supplies for his Haft-Sin, a display Persians put out for Nowruz that features seven components, all starting with the letter sin. These constituents, like purple hyacinth and sabzi (green sprouts in a circular dish), symbolize renewal. (Shavalian also makes stops at Elat Market to bring his grandmother gaz, a nougat that originated in Isfahan.) His childhood memories of going to Elat with his parents involve guarding their cart against other shoppers who might enjoy the convenience of someone else’s preselected items. This rang true: Elat is the only place I’ve ever shopped where someone has reached into my basket to admire a jar of something I’d picked up. Now that she can better negotiate the aisles, Rebecca has come to appreciate the beauty and uniqueness of Elat Market’s offerings. Shavalian is making a conscious effort to learn more Persian recipes, though most Persian foods are designed to be cooked in quantities. It’s a lot of work to make a khoresh for one.

The last word about these markets must be on their shopping carts, which are unimprovable. The carts have none of the wheel-locking nonsense of a larger chain’s. You just take your shopping cart, push your groceries home, unload your groceries, then leave the shopping cart pretty much anywhere. In the street, in your yard—truly, anywhere. Don’t give it a second thought. A man in a pickup truck who works for both Glatt and Elat Markets cruises the neighborhood for them and takes them back. I’ve seen at least one shopping cart with another store’s brand in the aisles of Glatt Mart, so it’s possible that he can be overzealous. But then exile, dislocation, and the promise of a new home that feels something (but not exactly like) the old one are precisely what these markets are about. ■

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**Pletzel**

Onion and Poppy Seed Flatbread

BY JOAN NATHAN

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### PREPARATION

**Step 1**

Pour 1 cup of lukewarm water into a large bowl. Stir in the yeast and the sugar until dissolved. Add 4 cups flour, the eggs, 1/4 cup of the oil, and the salt. Mix well, and knead for about 10 minutes, or until smooth, adding more flour if necessary. Or use a food processor or a standing mixer with a dough hook. Transfer the dough to a greased bowl, and let rise, covered, for 1 hour. Preheat the oven to 375 degrees, and grease 2 cookie sheets.

**Step 2**

Divide the dough into 12 balls, and roll or flatten them out into rounds about 6 inches in diameter. Put the rounds on the cookie sheets, and make thumbprints in the centers. Brush the dough with cold water, and sprinkle about 1/4 cup of the onions in each indentation. Brush the rounds with the remaining vegetable oil, and sprinkle the poppy seeds on top. Let sit for 15 minutes, uncovered.

**Step 3**

Bake for 20 minutes. Then, if you like, slip the pletzel under the broiler for a minute to brown the onions. Serve lukewarm, as is or in a big pletzel sandwich.

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### INGREDIENTS

- 1 scant tablespoon active dry yeast
- 4 tablespoons sugar
- 1/4 cup plus 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 4-5 cups all-purpose flour
- 2 large eggs
- 2 teaspoons salt
- 3 cups diced onions
- 1/4 cup poppy seeds

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