Ukraine’s Brave Stand Against Putin Upends Germany’s Pro-Russia Policy

But it will take more than a war to undo decades of emotional and economic investment in the Russian state

BY JEREMY STERN

One of the most consequential results of the failure of Vladimir Putin’s armies to disintegrate Ukraine, as large sections of the global diplomatic class seem to have wearily expected, may be taking place right now in Germany—a country that less than 10 days ago barred transfers of weapons to Ukraine and nixed calls to kick Putin off SWIFT. Confronted by public evidence of Ukrainian heroism and Russian failure, a sense of delirious regret seems to have gripped Berlin, as Germany’s new Social Democratic government set about shredding every basic assumption that has steered German foreign policy since the fall of the Berlin Wall.

It was only two weeks ago, in fact, on Feb. 15—when a Russian invasion force of nearly 200,000 stood on three Ukrainian borders—that Scholz assured Putin that Ukraine would not accede to NATO in the foreseeable future, three current and former German government officials confirmed to Tablet. Until Berlin froze Nord Stream 2 on Feb. 22, it had spent the previous seven years inflexibly defending the Gazprom-operated pipeline—whose sole purpose was to excise Ukraine from the European gas market by doubling direct imports from Russia into Germany. Now, both of those commitments have disappeared into thin air, to be replaced by a spasm of German resolve.

Indeed, the announcements by German Chancellor Olaf Scholz would have seemed like science fiction at any point since the end of the Cold War: A €100 billion investment in new weapons, including the acquisition of U.S. F-35...
warplanes and Israeli drones, plus a massive ongoing increase in the country’s overall defense spending target, up to 2% of GDP. Accompanying these sudden commitments to a robust and capable German military were announcements of the creation of a strategic gas reserve, financing for liquefied natural gas terminals, and speculation about bringing nuclear reactors back online to diversify from Russian gas imports.

In making these commitments, Germany was upending decades of voluntary dependence on the Kremlin even at the price of the country’s seemingly sacrosanct commitment to its less than successful, anti-nuclear “green” energy policy.

Nor are the changes in Berlin confined to the inner circles of the country’s current government. Reliably pro-Russian German media has spent the last six days running stories of betrayal by Vladimir Putin and wondering about the possible strategic blindness and failure of the otherwise untouchable Angela Merkel. Christoph Heusgen, Merkel’s foreign policy adviser of 12 years, admitted to their shared naivety, while Merkel’s last defense minister blamed herself for failing to face down the Putin sympathizers in the government.

In an about-face with more immediate consequences, the Scholz coalition has agreed to ban Russia from SWIFT, the payments system that finances international trade, as well as to send anti-aircraft missiles to Ukraine. For the first time since 1945, Russian soldiers may be killed with German arms.

There is no doubt that the recent revolution in German policy is real, and that the shock and determination behind it are sincere. Paradoxically, this kind of dizzying, overnight shift in attitude and fortunes characterizes much of Germany’s history, which has often been the product of external shocks. Yet there are reasons to wonder how deep it will run and how long German politics can allow it to hold.

The combination of deep shame, romantic fascination, and perceived familiarity that colors how many Germans feel about Russia and the Kremlin itself is not a simple problem that a war in Ukraine is likely to solve; it has been an essential part of German identity for decades, and might not be easily dislodged by the invasion of a country where many Germans, even those genuinely sickened by his means, have long believed that Putin has “understandable” claims. To this day, no major German leader has disavowed the promise of German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier that Germany will never participate in a war against Russia, implying a special German exemption from NATO’s Article 5 commitment of mutual assistance—a somewhat bizarre statement of where the country’s ultimate loyalties lie.

The central mantra of German foreign policy for the last 30 years has been that “there can be no security in Europe without Russia or against it,” a consciously vaporous cliché on behalf of which Germans have been willing to tolerate astonishing levels of
Russian violence and German complicity in Russian corruption—which has involved, for example, the wholesale purchase of the former leadership of the Social Democratic Party, from Gerhard Schroeder (Germany’s chancellor from 1998-2005) on down. The open ownership of large sections of German ex-officialdom by a foreign power has been tolerated and even lauded by the rest of Germany’s political class on the basis of a conviction that its special relationship with Russia holds the peace of Europe together.

Germans have spent two decades forging a strategic partnership with Putin that aided his belief in his ability to break it apart. In the wake of Scholz’s speech to a special session of the Bundestag on Sunday, in which he spoke movingly of “a change in the history of our continent,” there is a sense that a new Europe has been born on the back of a previously unthinkable degree of German solidarity and mettle. But this welcome glint of hope in the shattered glass of Ukraine may well prove illusory.

A good bit of Germany’s unusually close relationship with Putin’s Russia for the last 22 years can be explained by simple corruption, mercantilism, and myopia. Yet these qualities are hardly unique to Germany: For every German CEO or public official who has happily traded his integrity and duties to his own country in exchange for money and access in Russia, there is at least one American who has done the same or worse in China, as German officials often correctly point out.

An element of Germany’s approach to Russia that is just as important but less well understood, however, is psychological: Even in the Putin era, Germans have continued to regard the Russian state with intense guilt and extreme gratitude, both of which seem oddly misplaced, or displaced. While Germans might have plenty of good reasons to still feel guilty about the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, the shape that guilt takes has been more consonant with the needs of contemporary Russian nationalism than with historical reality: The Nazis inflicted their most extreme violence on ordinary Ukrainians and Belorussians—especially on Jews. Yet Soviet historians, as the scholar John Lough has pointed out, paradoxically allowed for no distinction between these nationalities and Russians, who were all “citizens” of the USSR, even though their separate “nationalities” were all duly recorded on the infamous fifth line of their Soviet passports.

According to official Soviet memory, the Nazis’ true victim, the war’s true victor, and the only deserving recipient of German apology, was the USSR—whose successor state is Russia. Other than Ukraine’s brief and troubled attempt at independence between 1917-1921, Germans never considered it or other former Soviet territories in Eastern Europe like Belarus or Moldova as anything other than “Russian” anyway. Since the end of the Cold War, the Kremlin has had an easy time convincing Germans to confl ate the entire USSR with modern Russia, and to direct its guilt about the Nazi period to Moscow at the expense of Kyiv.

For many years, the Russian government has been able to translate its near-monopoly on German war guilt into a more general willingness to see everything its way, which helps explain why Germans seem to remember important periods in recent history a bit differently than some of their neighbors and allies. Ostpolitik, West Germany’s policy of détente with Soviet-bloc countries that began in the 1960s, became something of a national religion in Germany after 1990, remembered exclusively as bringing peace to Europe and the Cold War to an end—rather than as having potentially extended the life of the USSR and its grip over Central and Eastern Europe. Germans also tend to remember reunification as a historically generous and selfless decision taken by Mikhail Gorbachev—who they believe had it in his power to keep Germany divided by force—rather than as a concession by Gorbachev to a reality in which a bankrupt and decaying Moscow no longer had the ability to militarily or economically enforce its dying empire.

By the time the USSR fell apart, Germans were as convinced as Americans that history had ended, and that even Russia would be swept up by liberalism, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Their sense that the endgame was known to all the players in advance made it easy for the Kremlin to exploit their self-understanding as the only people in NATO (and eventually the European Union) who truly understand Russia—resulting in the German neologism Russlandversteher, “Russia understander,” and its close cousin, Putinversteher, neither of which were considered terribly pejorative until very suddenly last week.

The Putinversteher, of course, were the last to actually see Putin’s Russia for what he had made it. As Putin bombed Chechnya, invaded Georgia, spoke of Russian “rights” in Eastern Europe, and reconverted Russian society into a quasi-feudal arrangement between a kleptocratic state and a citizenry with diminishing rights and legal protections, German diplomatic engagement with Moscow and exports to Russia both reached post-Cold War peaks. Germany’s conviction that its lucrative trade with Russia was also conveniently liberalizing it and facilitating its friendly integration into Europe recalled Germany’s skewed memory of Ostpolitik.

Putin’s increasingly apparent disdain for the rights of Eastern European states didn’t rattle Berlin as much as it might have in part because—like the Russian leader—Germans themselves appreciated the spaces between Russia and Germany less as a newly emancipated zone of independence than as a historically natural buffer zone in which Germany could manifest its economic supremacy. As long as Putin seemed to tolerate the conversion of former Warsaw Pact countries and Soviet territories into markets and pools of cheap labor supply for German industry—itself reinforcing Germany’s status as the dominant power in the European Union—the Putinversteher were willing to regard hints of a Russian “sphere of influence” not as menacing and eerily fascist but as “understandable.” In effect, Putin became the security contractor who would protect German factories in parts of Eastern Europe.

When Putin annexed Crimea and invaded eastern Ukraine in 2014, Merkel was genuinely shaken and revolted; any European official involved in U.S.-EU
talks over how to respond to Putin’s landgrab will testify to the fact that it was Merkel who led the ensuing robust sanctions regime—not Barack Obama, who lobbied heavily to water it down before shunting the matter entirely onto Germany and France. But according to one former British diplomat who was close to those talks, Merkel was also so desperate for a ceasefire that she quietly appeared to compromise with Putin on a diminution in Ukrainian sovereignty. In any case, the sanctions regime itself was designed to give the appearance that the West had appropriately punished Putin, rather than to actually hurt the Russian dictator and thereby influence his future decision-making.

By 2015, when discussions for a second Baltic Sea pipeline that would remove the dependence of German industry and consumers on Ukrainian transit routes became serious, there were no psychological obstacles left in the German system: Trading with Germany was liberalizing Russia; even if his methods were outdated, Putin’s understanding of Ukrainian independence was reasonable; eliminating Ukraine’s strategic importance to Europe would be no great loss to Berlin, etc. Merkel could argue for years with a straight face that Nord Stream 2 was a purely “commercial project” divorced from politics—even though the majority shareholder was Gazprom, a Russian state company—because “Russia” and Putin’s regime were seen as one and the same, and as part of the larger German economic order in the East.

In the years leading up to the current crisis, Putin repeatedly poked the German system under Merkel and found nothing but goo. A massive Russian hacking attack on the Bundestag in 2017 incurred no reaction. In the summer of 2019, an assassin connected to the Russian security services executed a Georgian citizen wanted by the Kremlin in broad daylight in Berlin, with no evident repercussions. At the same time, Merkel successfully lobbied for a restoration of Russian voting rights in the Council of Europe, a human rights organization, despite no change in the developments that had led to its suspension in the first place: Putin’s occupation and destabilization of Ukraine.

“The Trusting American policy in Ukraine may not be any smarter or more strategic than trusting Vladimir Putin. For Germany, it may be less so.”

The performance of Olaf Scholz over the weekend has been widely interpreted as a welcome and significant break from the Merkel-Schroeder consensus, and maybe it will be. But for those hoping for Germans to awake from their decadeslong geopolitical slumber, it is important to remember that Scholz is motivated not only by the peace of Europe and the future of democracy but by German domestic politics of the most immediate and least-elevated kind.

Before Putin’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine on Feb. 22, Scholz’s approval ratings had plummeted by more points in a shorter amount of time than any other postwar German chancellor. The Christian Democrats (Merkel’s party) had overtaken the Social Democrats (Scholz’s) in polls for the first time since the December elections, and elevated Friedrich Merz, an arch conservative and master of parliamentary maneuvering, to leader of the opposition. If Merz is able to break up Scholz’s coalition with the Greens and Free Democrats, there would be no new elections—only a swapping in of Merz and his party for Scholz and his.

Prior to the events of last week, Merz had cleverly dropped the Christian Democrats’ support for Nord Stream 2 and floated the possibility of expelling Russia from SWIFT, seeking to exploit Scholz’s vulnerability as the head of Germany’s most pro-Russian political party. By announcing such a dramatic U-turn in Germany’s defense, energy, and Russia policies, Scholz not only demonstrated support for an embattled Ukraine: He effectively neutralized his most significant domestic opponent in an hour of extreme political crisis.

Scholz’s decision to freeze Nord Stream 2 in particular had an element of political savvy behind it. It was no doubt an important and highly symbolic move, but Scholz knew that if he didn’t put the pipeline on hold himself, the United States would have done it for him—by sanctioning Nord Stream 2 AG, the operating company chaired by Gerhard Schroeder, Scholz’s mentor, and the personification of German corruption in Russia. By putting the pipeline to rest, at least for now, Scholz ensured that German investors and politicians involved in the project would not get caught in the crosshairs of the U.S. Senate—and that control over the potential reopening of the project would most likely remain in German hands.

It’s no great crime for a politician to hide the advancement of certain political priorities in the exclusive guise of moral obligation, but even if Berlin’s awakening is genuine, it’s unclear how quickly the revolution in its defense and energy policies can be converted into reality. The German military has been a hollow shell for generations; even with higher spending, it will take decades to turn it into a real-world fighting force, which will be as nothing compared with the multigenerational effort it will take to convince the German public to accept an active role for the Bundeswehr in European security. As for energy, the nuclear reactors taken offline by Merkel’s phaseout cannot be switched back on even in a matter of months; energy supplied by modular reactors and increases in LNG imports would not make up for a potential loss in supply of Russian gas, should Putin decide to shut off the spigot.

How would Scholz weigh the importance of German support for Ukraine against the prospect of German pensioners freezing to death in winter? How long could his coalition with the
Green Party survive under a full-scale return to nuclear and coal-fired energy? What happens when German industry furiously demands action to reverse the precipitous climb of energy prices hammering its ability to compete with Chinese firms? All of these are questions for another day, clearly—now that Scholz has fended off the threat from Merz.

Furthermore, what incentives will Scholz have to lean so far out in front of his skis when the United States is clearly unwilling to do the same, and seems incapable of steady policy commitments to its allies? The Biden administration’s “historic” and “crippling” sanctions against Russia include carve-outs for energy and agricultural commodities, which account for the bulk of the Russian economy, because the White House is terrified of an inflationary spiral that would sink the Democrats’ already-grim prospects in the midterm elections. Washington is only now sending Ukraine the air defense systems and other defensive weapons for which Kyiv has been pleading for months—and which the Biden administration repeatedly refused to send. Behind closed doors, what do German officials make of well-documented reports that as vice president, Biden’s family personally profited from an energy tariff corruption scheme that he personally guaranteed in concert with the then-president of Ukraine, who voters threw out of office in favor of Volodymyr Zelensky—a popular democratic decision that now looks to be of Churchillian proportions?

True greatness, as taught by Europe—on Friday, Feb. 25, to his counterparts over Zoom during a special meeting of the European Union: “This is maybe the last time that you will see me alive.”

What is greatness?

True greatness, as taught by European chivalry?

Perhaps it is that.

That heroism, calm and proud.

A touch of Allende the night before the assault of the Moneda by Pinochet’s death squads.

The way he told President Biden, who offered up an exfiltration—“I need weapons, not a taxi”—and Putin, today’s Pinochet: “You can try to kill me, I am ready for it, since I know that the idea lives in me and will survive me.”

The time this article appears, Volodymyr Zelensky will still be alive.

We do know that he is in Kyiv, surrounded by his generals, in a bunker that the Sukhoi fighter jets seek.

And we have just seen him in a video where he appears helmetless, outside, like a young Churchill walking in the poor neighborhoods of London during the Nazi Blitz of September 1940.

But I also know that he is at the top of the Kremlin’s kill list, according to the English-language press.

His recent farewells come to mind—on Friday, Feb. 25, to his counterparts over Zoom during a special meeting of the European Union: “This is maybe the last time that you will see me alive.”

What is greatness?

True greatness, as taught by European chivalry?

Perhaps it is that.

That heroism, calm and proud.

A touch of Allende the night before the assault of the Moneda by Pinochet’s death squads.

The way he told President Biden, who offered up an exfiltration—“I need weapons, not a taxi”—and Putin, today’s Pinochet: “You can try to kill me, I am

ready for it, since I know that the idea lives in me and will survive me.”

The first time I met him was on March 30, 2019, the night before the first round of his stunning election, in a seafood restaurant near the Maidan.

I had just performed, at the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Looking for Europe, the theatrical monologue that I was bringing then to the European capitals. My friend Vladislav Davidzon, one of the last American journalists still in Ukraine—reporting for Tablet—had arranged the meeting.

Volodymyr Zelensky was, at the time, a very young man. Looking like a paper boy in jeans, old sneakers, and a black T-shirt with a worn neckline, he had spent the night celebrating the final performance, in an old Kyiv skating rink turned café-theater, of “Servant of the People,” the one-man show that had made him famous.

We talked about Beppe Grillo, that other cabaret actor, and founder of the Five Star movement in Italy, whom Zelensky hated being compared to. About French Coluche, whose story he didn’t know well and whose final pirouette, a decision to retire from the
presidential election, he did not quite understand: “Maybe because there was now a great man in France, François Mitterrand, so his service was no longer needed?”

About Ronald Reagan, by contrast, he knew everything; hadn’t he just done—for the Ukrainian TV channel 1+1, which belongs to the Israeli-Ukrainian Igor Kolomoyskyi, Zelensky’s sponsor—the voice-over for a docudrama on the destiny of this actor in bad Westerns who became a great president?

We also spoke about Putin, the other Vladimir, about whom he had no doubt: If he would come face to face, he would make Putin laugh, just as he had made all Russians laugh. “I act in the Russian language, you know; the kids love me, in Moscow; they double over with laughter at my sketches; the only thing is …”

He hesitated …

Then, over the table, in a low voice: “There is one thing … this man does not see; he has eyes, but does not see; or, if he does look, it’s with an icy stare, devoid of all expression.”

The other subject of our conversation was his Judaism.

How could a young Jew, born into a family decimated by the Shoah, in the oblast of Dnipropetrovsk, become president of the country of Babi Yar?

It’s simple, he answered, with a hoarse laugh: “There is less antisemitism in Ukraine than in France; and, above all, less than in Russia where, hunting for the Nazi mote in thy brother’s eye, they end up missing the beam in thine own eye; wasn’t it Ukrainian units of the Red Army that liberated Auschwitz, after all?”

Our second meeting took place at the annual Yalta European Strategy conference, the Ukrainian mini-Davos created by the philanthropist Victor Pinchuk.

Like every year, there were distinguished geopoliticians, American officials, NATO representatives, acting or former European heads of state, and intellectuals.

Zelensky, now president, gave a strong speech in which he laid out his plan for combatting corruption, the scourge of his country’s economy.

The time came for the traditional closing dinner, where the host would, over pears and cheese, offer a “surprise” to anchor the event: one year, Donald Trump, candidate … another, Elton John or Stephen Hawking …

This time the surprise, arriving on the stage, in front of the tables, is the troupe of actors who had performed with the new head of state, up to his election.

One does an impersonation of Angela Merkel.

Another plays a supposed WhatsApp exchange, hilarious and salacious, between Trump and Hillary Clinton.

And here was a third, made up like Zelensky, playing a rustic Ukrainian who speaks poor English searching for someone to interpret for him and pointing, as if by chance, at the real Zelensky, who without being asked twice, bounds out of his chair to join his comrades on stage.

That was the situation.

A fake Zelensky, playing the real one.

The real Zelensky, playing the interpreter of the fake.

The fake, translated by the real, offers up howlers that the other is forced to translate, which make fun of him.

In short, an incredible show.

The room, faced with this quid pro quo, this joyful blurring of original and copy, faced with the self-effacement of a president swallowed by his avatar, hesitates among laughter, uneasiness, and amazement.

That night, Zelensky was Woody Allen inviting us, like in The Purple Rose of Cairo, into his film, or, better, into his TV series.

When the show was over, I went to ask him what Putin, in Moscow, might think of this enemy disappearing behind his mask and allowing himself to be silent within his simulacrum. He told me this: “It’s true! The attitude is surely unheard of in the main repertoire of the FSB! But laughter is a weapon that is fatal to men of marble! You shall see.”

We met again, once more, last year.

I was coming back from reporting in the Donbas, where I had run the front lines from Mariupol to Luhansk, with elite troops of the new Ukrainian army. And while my photographers, Marc Roussel and Gilles Hertzog, had laid out some of their best shots on the coffee table in the room where we were being received, a whole other Zelensky revealed himself.

In one of the photos, taken at Novotroitske, Zelensky recognized Major General Viktor Ganushchak, the leader of the 10th Battalion of the Alpine Chasers brigade, mildly paunchy in a chicane jacket straight out of frozen Verdun.

About another photo, taken in the Myroliubovka zone, near Donetsk, he commented to Andriy Yermak, his close adviser, to his right, on the vulnerability of three 155 mm cannons, positioned like prehistoric iron monsters in the middle of a field.

About a third, taken near Donetsk, on a gutted road in the ghost town Pisky, he knew the exact number of brave souls who, dug into the mud and snow, held the line.

And then, in Zolote, not far from Luhansk, in a maze of trenches made from an assembly of planks planted in the black earth, he knew by name, having just inspected them, most of the over-equipped Rambos, their faces muddy or hooded, who stood guard every 30 feet and seemed hypnotized by the no man’s land before them.

Did Volodymyr Zelensky already know, on that day, that Putin had decided he’d had enough of the Ukrainian democratic exception, and of his clowning? Did he understand that he would never, after all, laugh with the cold-eyed man with an assassin’s soul?

At that moment, things became clear. I understood that this former artist of
the LOL and the stand-up, whose true nature I thought I had found at the gala dinner in Kyiv, had transformed himself into a warrior.

I saw him join the exemplary company of the men and women that I’d revered my whole life—from republican Spain to Sarajevo and Kurdistan—who are not made for the part that befalls them, but who take it up with panache and learn to make war without loving it.

And in his silhouette grown heavier, on his features once young like French republican drummer boy Francois Joseph Bara, now resembling the French revolutionary Georges Danton, I saw the resistance fighter whose courage amazes the world today.

Zelensky can win. This man who prefers to die fighting than to suffer the dishonor of forced surrender, this comedian who yesterday seemed to say “all is lost except honor,” but who, this morning, after another night of bombings, finds the inner strength to inspire his people, and to tell them they are still free, is Putin’s nightmare; he can—if we decide to help him, meaning to send him the “bullets and powder” that Victor Hugo asked for the “Greek child,” and that he needs so desperately—become Putin’s downfall.

Translated from the French by Matthew Fishbane.

This article was originally published on February 28, 2022.

---

Russia’s Next Target for Intimidation Could Be Israel

As Moscow slides into global pariah status, it will want to upgrade ties with its closest allies on NATO’s southern flank: Syria and Iran

BY KSENIA SVETLOVA

A

s Russia pounds Ukrainian cities and flaunts its nuclear weapons, there is little doubt that the implications of the war between Russia and the West will be felt globally—and the relations between states that prevailed only two weeks ago are unlikely to remain static. The International Criminal Court in The Hague may investigate possible war crimes committed by Russian leadership, while Western governments keep piling on unprecedented economic sanctions. As a result, Russia will be looking for alternative markets and spheres of influence, specifically in the Middle East and Africa, where it has become very involved during the last decade. While Moscow ratchets up military and economic pressure on Ukraine, using forbidden types of weapons and indiscriminate firepower against civilians, many in Israel fear that Moscow’s next move will happen in the Middle East—where Moscow is formally aligned with Israel’s worst enemies.

By Feb. 15, when the whole world was still trying to guess Vladimir Putin’s real intentions in Ukraine, his defense minister and confidant Sergey Shoigu had traveled to Syria, where he met with President Bashar Assad and inspected a Russian military exercise—the largest that Russia had held in the

Eastern Mediterranean since the end of the Cold War. For this occasion, Russia transferred advanced weapons, including MiG-31s armed with hypersonic missiles, as well as strategic Tupolev Tu-22M bombers to its Khmeimim air base, positioning a potent new threat near Israel’s borders.

Just a few years ago, there was hardly any Russian presence in the Eastern Mediterranean. Since the beginning of the Russian intervention in Syria, facilitated by the Obama administration to counterbalance Turkey and aid Iran, Moscow has reinforced its naval presence there dramatically. Although the Russian forces in this area are still limited in comparison with their abilities in the Black Sea, experts from the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies believe that Russia already has enough forces to present a potential challenge to longstanding U.S. and NATO naval dominance in the area.

As war clouds gathered over Ukraine, Israel became worried. Israel and Russia maintain tactical cooperation over Syria and run a deconfliction center in order to prevent Russian and Israeli forces from clashing. Since the beginning of Russia’s military involvement in Syria, Israel has been walking on thin ice, trying to balance its own security needs with the necessity of making nice with the Russians who now controlled the Syrian skies. A change in the Russian
posture in Syria, particularly as America works to seal its reentry into the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran, portends a far less favorable and more dangerous calculus than the one that Israel has grown used to since 2014.

For a time, the balancing act went well. While the Russians did not prevent Israel from hunting Iranian war targets in Syria (as was often reported in foreign media), Israel refrained from commenting on Russia's aggressive demeanor—even when the United States publicly voiced opposition. In fact, this arrangement predates Russian involvement in Syria. In 2014—one year before Russia became Israel's neighbor on its northern border—Israel refused to condemn Russia's annexation of Crimea despite some pressure from the Obama administration to do so.

But 2022 isn't 2014. Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid first timidly condemned Russian behavior in a TV interview. He then announced that Israel will vote with the United States and EU countries against Russia in the U.N. General Assembly.

So what might be the repercussions for Israel of its public anti-Russian stance, however mild? There is no doubt that Russia is looking to flex its muscles in Syria, where it's built an impressive military presence. As Russia slides into a pariah status in the international arena, it will want to upgrade ties with its closest allies in the region: Syria and Iran.

SECTION On the military front, signs of Russia's new regional posture are already visible. During the last few weeks that preceded the war in Ukraine, Russia strongly rebuked Israeli activity in Syrian skies, while Israelis complained that Russia was jamming GPS signals in Israeli airspace. At the end of January, Russia and Syria started joint patrols along the Golan Heights and the Euphrates River. In Israel, this activity was interpreted as a sharp message to Jerusalem: Things in Syria might change soon, and fast. Since other countries like the United States and Turkey also operate in Syrian skies, the Russian message might be addressed to all concerned parties to let them know that Russia is determined to force them out of Syrian airspace and help Damascus reclaim its sovereignty there.

Yet other Russian messages were clearly directed at Israel. Since the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, when Israel was still mulling its reaction, busy Russian diplomats found the time to rebuke Israel over construction of new cities in the Golan Heights—possibly in reaction to timid Israeli attempts to support Ukraine without condemning Russia too strongly. While Moscow has since signaled that cooperation with Israel will go on as usual, many in Israel fear that Russia, emboldened by its violent move on Ukraine and furious about global sanctions, will become more aggressive and assertive in protecting its interests in Syria, and pay less attention to possible Israeli responses.

Until recently, some in Israel believed that Russia might work together with Israel and the United States to push Iran out of Syria—under the assumption that Russia and the United States shared this interest in common with Israel. Nowadays, this kind of scenario (however dubious it was in the past) is simply out of the question. Moscow will need Tehran and Damascus more than ever, perhaps even more than they need Moscow. This development might mean more interoperation between all three parties and a significantly more aggressive tone toward Israel. In turn, if Israel is not able to freely operate in Syrian skies against Iranian military targets, an emboldened Iran seems likely to try to further grow its military presence near Israel's borders, raising the stakes in Syria, Lebanon, and Gaza.

Another possible target for Russia's military is the Eastern Mediterranean. If until now the sea was mostly seen as EU and NATO playground, today's Russian navy presence might pose a serious challenge to Europeans and Americans—and by extension Israel, whose economy depends in large part on open shipping from its ports. Turkey might soon see new developments in Syrian Idlib, where pro-Turkish militants still operate, and 3 million Syrians find their refuge, which may create wider instability in the region.

SECTION While Russian-Iranian rapprochement in Syria seems almost inevitable, the future of strategic relations between the two countries is still a puzzle.

Until recently, Russia saw Iran as a problematic neighbor, an occasional partner (for example, in Syria) and mostly as a country that was best held at arm's length. When Iran demanded acceptance as a full member of the Eurasian Economic Treaty (a Russian-led block that also includes Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan), Russia took its time to "consider." And when Iranians offered extensive cooperation in trade and industry, Russia generally ignored these requests. During the visit of the new Iranian president to Russia in January this year, no important treaty or memorandum of understanding was signed, to the disappointment of the Iranians.

Now, Russia needs Iran and its markets more than ever before. For Moscow it might be the right time to expand the partnership, as the Iranians have been demanding. Yet if Iran signs the nuclear deal, brokered in large part by Russia, the roles of Russia and Iran may be reversed, with Iran—if sanctions are lifted—having a stronger and even determining hand in that relationship.

There is a loud anti-Russian camp in Iran that remembers well how Moscow ignored Iranian demands for a long time. Yet there is also no doubt that Tehran will be happy to receive the latest Russian weapons. It now seems likely that Iran will get the weapons systems it demanded a long time ago even if for some reason the nuclear deal is not finalized. Russia has nothing more to lose and it will have to seize every opportunity to continue to sell its weapons to anyone who demands them.

What's on the Iranian shopping list? According to the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, Iran is interested in SU-30 fighters, Yak-130 trainers, T-90 tanks and—the cherry on top—S-400 surface-to-air missile defense systems that Russia previously refrained from selling. Even if Russia fulfills only part of the Iranian shopping list, it will be very bad news for Israel. Until recently, advanced Russian missile systems inside Syria were under full Russian control. That might change as well.
The greatest threat that Russia poses to Israel may be in the expansion of its regional influence, especially in the absence of an effective U.S.-led security structure. With the exception of Lebanon and Kuwait, which denounced Russia, and Syria, a full Russian client that denounced the West, the Arab states are currently sitting on the fence, unwilling to put their neck on the line for either the United States or the Russians. During the last few years some of these countries, particularly the Gulf states, didn’t hide their frustration with American Middle East policy, which aimed under both the Obama and Trump administrations at diminishing the American presence in the region—and which under Presidents Barack Obama and Joe Biden put a U.S. nuclear deal with Iran at the top of American regional priorities. In response, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt all began purchasing Russian (and Chinese) weapons, and putting their relations with Moscow on display.

Russia has significantly expanded its web of relations in the Middle East, mostly due to the fear of some countries that they might be abandoned by the West. If the United States wants these countries to join an alliance against Moscow, it might have to rethink its regional policy—or else rethink its relations with Arab countries who might wish to continue with their current balancing act. Yet Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia heavily depend on wheat supplies from Russia and Ukraine. Rising prices on basic food staples and energy might disrupt stability in many countries in the region, creating more risks and insecurity. All of these developments might in turn have a negative influence on Israel and its attempt to build new alliances in the region—especially if Russia sees Israel as an American instrument, while the Americans see Iran as a partner.

There is little doubt that fateful events in Ukraine have turned over the chess board in the Middle East, as elsewhere. While risks for Israel are bound to increase, it will need—now more than ever—firm American support and a confident U.S. policy in the Middle East. A new American deal with Iran, which remains America’s regional priority even during the war in Ukraine, seems unlikely to provide those assurances.

This article was originally published on March 1, 2022.

---

**News**

**Ukraine’s Deadly Gamble**

By tying itself to a reckless and dangerous America, the Ukrainians made a blunder that client states will study for years to come

*By Lee Smith*

Russian President Vladimir Putin chose this war, Joe Biden said in his Thursday afternoon speech to America regarding the conflict in Ukraine. That is true, but U.S. elites also had something to do with Putin’s ugly and destructive choice—a role that Democrats and Republicans are eager to paper over with noble-sounding rhetoric about the bravery of Ukraine’s badly outfoughted military. Yes, the Ukrainian soldiers standing up to Putin are very brave, but it was Americans that put them in harm’s way by using their country as a weapon, first against Russia and then against each other, with little consideration for the Ukrainian people who are now paying the price for America’s folly.

It is not an expression of support for Putin's grotesque actions to try to understand why it seemed worthwhile for him to risk hundreds of billions of dollars, the lives of thousands of servicemen, and the possible stability of his own regime in order to invade his neighbor. After all, Putin’s reputation until this moment has always been as a shrewd ex-KGB man who eschewed high-risk gambles in favor of sure things backed by the United States, like entering Syria and then escalating forces there. So why has he adopted exactly the opposite strategy here, and chosen the road of open high-risk confrontation with the American superpower?

Yes, Putin wants to prevent NATO from expanding to Russia’s border. But the larger answer is that he finds the U.S. government’s relationship with Ukraine genuinely threatening. That’s because for nearly two decades, the U.S. national security establishment under both Democratic and Republican administrations has used Ukraine as an instrument to destabilize Russia, and specifically to target Putin.

While the timing of Putin’s attack on Ukraine is no doubt connected to a variety of factors, including the Russian dictator’s read on U.S. domestic politics and the preferences of his own superpower sponsor in Beijing, the sense that Ukraine poses a meaningful threat to Russia is not a product of Putin’s paranoia—or of a sudden desire to restore the power and prestige of the Soviet Union, however much Putin might wish for that to happen. Rather, it is a geopolitical threat that has grown steadily more pressing and been employed with greater recklessness by Americans and Ukrainians alike over the past decade.

That Ukraine has allowed itself to
be used as a pawn against a powerful neighbor is in part the fault of Kyiv’s reckless and corrupt political class. But Ukraine is not a superpower that owes allies and client-states judicious leadership—that’s the role of the United States. And in that role, the United States has failed Ukraine. More broadly, the use of Ukraine as a goad against enemies domestic and foreign has recklessly damaged the failing yet necessary European security architecture that America spent 75 years building and maintaining.

Why can’t the American security establishment shoulder responsibility for its role in the tragedy unfolding in Ukraine? Because to discuss American responsibility openly would mean exposing the national security establishment’s role in two separate, destructive coups: the first, in 2014, targeting the government of Ukraine, and the second, starting two years later, the government of the United States.

In the last year there have been two attempted “pro-democracy” inter-elite coups in pro-Kremlin states on Russian borders: Belarus and Kazakhstan. Both of those so-called “color revolutions” failed, but Ukraine represents a much more pressing concern, especially given the country’s push for NATO membership, which Biden officials like Secretary of State Antony Blinken publicly encouraged last year with no intention or possibility of actually making it possible. Yet rather than compelling the United States to rethink the wisdom of planting the NATO flag on Russia’s border, Putin’s escalating rhetoric—and troop movements—only made the Biden team dig in deeper.

This is a game that Biden and key figures in his administration have been playing for a long time, beginning with the 2013-14 Obama administration-backed coup that toppled a Russia-friendly government in Kyiv. This was the so-called Maidan Revolution, a sequel to the George W. Bush-backed Orange Revolution of 2004-05. Much of that same Obama foreign policy team—Blinken, Jake Sullivan, Victoria Nuland, Susan Rice, and others—is now back in the White House and State Department working in senior posts for a president who personally ran Obama’s Ukraine policy.

What did all these figures have in mind for Ukraine? The White House and U.S. foreign policy experts from both parties are united in claiming that Ukraine is a U.S. ally, a democracy, and a beacon of freedom, which are no doubt fine words to hear when you have been left to fight Vladimir Putin on your own. But to understand what Ukraine truly is, we must start where all geopolitics begins: by looking at a map.

Ukraine is situated between two greater powers, Russia and the European Union. That makes Ukraine a buffer state. Geopolitical logic dictates that buffer states cultivate and maintain cordial relations with the greater powers that surround them, unless they want to be swallowed up by one of those powers. That’s because siding with one great power against another often leads to catastrophe. No less an authority than the prophet Isaiah tells us so. He warned the Jews not to side with the pharaoh—a broken reed, he called Egypt, which pierces the hand of anyone who leans on it—in the dynasty’s conflict with the Babylonians. Isaiah was right: The Jews bet wrong and were dragged off into exile.

Today Israel is no longer a buffer state; rather, it’s a regional power. But geography didn’t change, which means that Israel is still a tiny country sur-rounded by larger entities, like Turkey and Iran.

So how did the Jewish state transcend buffer-state status? Because it acquired what is reportedly a large nuclear arsenal with air, land, and sea delivery capabilities—the vaunted nuclear triad—which render it immune to an enemy’s first strike, and ensures, for the time being anyway, that Israel is no longer a stomping ground for empires. Conversely, Ukraine gave up its nuclear arsenal in 1994 in exchange for U.S. security guarantees in the event its neighbors, Russia in particular, turned hostile.

What kind of strategy dictates that a state hand over its security vis-a-vis local actors to a country half the world away? No strategy at all. Ukraine was not able to transcend its natural geography as a buffer state—and worse, a buffer state that failed to take its own existence seriously, which meant that it would continue to make disastrously bad bets. In 2013, the European Union offered Kyiv a trade deal, which many misunderstood as a likely prelude to EU membership. Young Ukrainians very much want to join the EU, because they want access to Europe so they can flee Ukraine, which remains one of the poorest countries on the continent.

The trade deal was an ill-conceived EU project to take a shot at Putin with what seemed like little risk. The idea was to flood the Ukrainian market, and therefore also the Russian market, with European goods, which would have harmed the Russian economy—leading, the architects of this plan imagined, to popular discontent that would force Putin himself from office. Putin understandably saw this stratagem as a threat to his country’s stability and his personal safety, so he gave Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych an ultimatum: either reject the deal and accept Moscow’s $15 billion aid package in its place, or else suffer crippling economic measures.

When Yanukovych duly reneged on the EU deal, the Obama administration helped organize street demonstrations for what became history’s most tech-savvy and PR-driven regime change operation, marketed to the global public variously as Maidan, EuroMaidan, the Revolution of Dignity, etc. In February 2014, the protests forced Yanukovych into exile in Moscow. Consequently, Nuland and other Obama administration officials worked to assemble a new Ukrainian government friendly to the United States and therefore hostile to Russia.

In late February, the Russians responded to the American soft coup in Ukraine by invading Crimea and eventually annexing it and creating chaos in Eastern Ukraine. The Obama administration declined to arm the Ukrainian government. It was right to avoid
conflict with Moscow, though by leaving Kyiv defenseless, it showed that the White House had never fully gamed out all the possible scenarios that might ensue from setting a client state on course for conflict with a great power. Instead, Obama and the Europeans highlighted their deadly miscalculation by imposing sanctions on Moscow for taking advantage of the conditions that Obama and the Europeans had created.

The White House seems to have taken a perverse pride in the death and destruction it helped incite in Eastern Europe. In April 2014, CIA Director John Brennan visited Kyiv, appearing to confirm the agency’s role in the coup. Shortly after came Vice President Biden, who took his own victory lap and counseled the Ukrainians to root out corruption. Naturally, a prominent Ukrainian energy company called Burisma, which was then under investigation for corruption, hired Biden’s son Hunter for protection.

By tying itself to an American administration that had shown itself to be reckless and dangerous, the Ukrainians made a geopolitical blunder that statesmen will study for years to come: A buffer state had staked its future on a distant power that had simply seen it as an instrument to annoy its powerful neighbor with no attachment to any larger strategic concept that it was willing to support.

“A buffer state had staked its future on a distant power that had simply seen it as an instrument to annoy its powerful neighbor with no attachment to any larger strategic concept that it was willing to support.”

By appearing before the U.S. Congress to argue against Obama’s nuclear deal with Iran, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu took sides with Republicans against a sitting American president—which seems like an even bigger potential faux pas.

The differences between the two situations are even more revealing, though. The Iran deal touched on a core Israeli national interest. As a U.S. ally, Israel was challenging the wisdom of handing nuclear weapons to its own (and America’s) leading regional competitor and rival. By contrast, Ukraine had no existential or geopolitical reason to participate in the anti-Trump operation, which allowed it at best to curry favor with one side of the D.C. establishment while angering what turned out to be the winning party. Russiagate was the kind of vanity project that a buffer state with a plunging GDP and an army equipped with 40-year-old ex-Soviet weapons in a notoriously risky area of the world can ill afford—especially one that lacked a nuclear arsenal.

And that was only the beginning. Just as Russiagate seemed to be coming to a close in July 2019, U.S. national security officials injected yet another Ukraine-related narrative into the public sphere to target the American president. This one appears to have been initiated by Ukrainian American White House official Alexander Vindman and his colleague Eric Ciaramella, a CIA analyst who had served as Vice President Biden’s point man on Ukraine during the Obama administration. When Vindman told Ciaramella about a phone call in which Trump had asked the Ukrainian president for information regarding allegations about the Biden family’s corrupt activities in Kyiv, they called on help from U.S. intelligence services, the State Department, the Pentagon, Democratic Party officials, and the press. Quick, scramble Team Ukraine—Trump is asking questions!

In order to cover up for what the Bidens and perhaps other senior Obama officials had done in Ukraine, a Democratic Congress impeached Trump for trying to figure out what American policymakers had been doing in Ukraine over the past decade. As for the Ukrainians,
they again put themselves in the middle of it, when they should have stayed home.

The end result was that the Ukrainians had helped weaken an American president who, unlike Obama, gave them arms to defend themselves against the Russians. More seriously, they reinforced Putin’s view that, especially in partnership with the Democrats, Ukraine did not understand its true place in the world as a buffer state—and would continue to allow themselves to be used as an instrument by policymakers whose combination of narcissism and fecklessness made them particularly prone to dangerous miscalculations. The 2020 election victory of Joe Biden, a man whose family had been paid by the Ukrainians to protect them, can have done little to quiet Putin’s sense that Ukraine needed to be put in its place before it was used yet again as a weapon against him.

From the perspective of the U.S. national security establishment, Biden’s victory over Trump signaled that its actions in Ukraine would stay hidden. So long as the media continued to bark that the 45th president of the United States is Putin’s stooge, no one would be held accountable for anything. Except, as it turns out, D.C. political operatives aren’t the only people who can make history. Putin can, too. And the people of Ukraine will come out much the worse for both of their efforts.

This article was originally published on February 25, 2022.  

---

**NEWS**

**Shrill Ackman**

Cringe Twitter postings by hedge funder reveal one comforting truth: Money doesn’t buy smarts

**BY LIEL LEIBOVITZ**

Most of us walk around thinking that the megarich get the sort of intel the rest of us could never afford, which makes them, if not more intelligent, at least infinitely better informed. It’s nice, then, to learn that our uber-wealthy can spout flamboyantly ignorant nonsense as wildly as brain-dead plebes on Twitter.

Exhibit A: Bill Ackman. Number 391 on the Forbes 400 list, the hedge fund manager spent the past week thirstily tweeting silly pablum about Ukraine. “You can fix the errors of the past and protect our future,” he intoned, adopting the voice of a Very Serious Person. “With all due respect, Mr. President, the time is now.” The cringe was ... a lot. But if the dude who the other month bought a billion-dollar stake in Netflix wants to audition for the reboot of *West Wing*, c’est la vie, I guess.

Then, however, the performatively inept Ackman retweeted a call for Israel to supply Ukraine with its Iron Dome missile defense system, adding his own passioned plea for the Jewish state to do the right thing:

#Israel of all countries should not be standing by while women and children are dying. Ukraine needs every tool to defend itself. History will judge us all based on how we acted in Ukraine’s time of need. #StandingWithUkraine

Responding to Ackman, a vastly wiser investor, Michael Eisenberg, offered a much too polite account of everything Ackman got wrong, all of which is evident to anyone with a basic internet connection. Let’s go slow for the intellectually challenged titans of the universe among us: First, Iron Dome is a joint project of Israel and the United States, which means Jerusalem can’t just put the whole thing in a box and ship it to Kyiv. Then there’s the pesky fact that the complex system requires highly skilled operators, who in turn need a lot of dedicated training and time to put it into place, none of which is particularly helpful to a nation under attack this minute.

But really the icing on the cake is the best part: The reason Israel is in the pickle it’s in at all is because of Barack Obama, to whom Sir Bill has been a generous donor.

As Eisenberg patiently explained, the 44th president paved the way for Russia to establish itself on Israel’s northern border when he failed to act upon the red lines he himself had imposed on Syria’s Assad when the latter giddily massacred his own people. And with Obama’s vice president now in the Oval Office and picking up his former boss’s talks with Iran, expecting Israel to step up, defy its own vital security interests, upset the major power now perched on its border thanks to Washington’s calamitous foreign policy and put its trust instead in the same American team that mucked it up in the first place is, to put it politely, not a very smart thing to say.

When you come to understand that it was these people who delivered disaster, the reality becomes so ironic as to be laugh-out-loud funny: Ukraine’s problem actually isn’t Israel. It’s ... Bill Ackman.

This article was originally published on March 1, 2022.  

---

**PODCASTS**

Hundreds of episodes at tabletmag.com/podcasts
THE REST

➤ Perhaps the most significant change in the disposition of the war was China offering to “play a role” in brokering a cease-fire between Russia and Ukraine. The offer was coupled with a shift in tone from Beijing, which released a statement saying it is “extremely concerned about the harm to civilians,” which has some observers speculating that we may be seeing a rift emerge in the critical China-Russia alliance. That’s possible, but given what we know about Chinese-Russian intelligence sharing and discussion of Moscow’s war plans prior to the invasion, it is at least equally possible that the current moves are part of a choreographed diplomatic sequence aimed at preserving Beijing’s international standing while buying Moscow space to maneuver.

➤ Russia’s ruble crashed to record lows after the news that the European Union would exclude Russia from using the Belgian-based financial messaging system SWIFT, which acts as the global clearing system for transactions between banks across the world. While the ban had yet to be implemented on Tuesday, the Russian economy appeared to be heading for a crash under broad sanctions that have expanded far beyond the country’s leaders to target the country’s financial and monetary system, a policy that may increase leverage over Vladimir Putin but will also create significant hardships for Russian citizens.

➤ The UJA-Federation of New York said that it will disperse $3 million in emergency funds with a focus on providing medical and humanitarian care to the some 200,000 members of the Ukrainian Jewish community. In Israel, Foreign Minister Yair Lapid condemned the Russian attack, amplifying the official Israeli rhetoric on the conflict that some initially criticized for being too passive. Prime Minister Naftali Bennett promised humanitarian assistance to President Zelensky in a phone call today, further solidifying Israel’s position to back up Ukraine. The Israeli Minister of Diaspora Affairs Nachman Shai announced as well that his office would disperse a $3.1 million aid package to the Jews of Ukraine.

➤ President Biden nominated Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson to the Supreme Court to fill the seat of Justice Stephen Breyer, who is retiring at the end of this term. Currently serving as a judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia, Jackson clerked for Breyer early in her career and worked for the U.S. Sentencing Commission, a federal agency tasked with developing sentencing policies for federal courts. Her notable work as an assistant federal public defender would make her the first Justice with such experience since Justice Thurgood Marshall retired in 1991. If confirmed, the 51-year-old will be the second-youngest Justice and the first African American woman to serve on the highest court in the land.

➤ So far the People’s Convoy, an American trucker movement modeled on Canada’s Freedom Convoy protests against government vaccine mandates, is far smaller than its northern counterpart, with an estimated 200 to 250 trucks spotted moving east through Oklahoma over the weekend. The convoy has raised $1.5 million as part of its push to demand that President Biden end the state of emergency declared at the start of the pandemic and repeal all COVID-19-related public mandates. The convoy was slowed on Sunday, when four of its vehicles got into an accident in Oklahoma, but is back on the road and heading toward Washington, D.C., where participants planned to convene ahead of President Biden’s inaugural State of the Union Address.

FROM THE BACK PAGES

Perhaps you’re one of those smart folks who never really got into social media over the past decade or so; didn’t make accounts that list all of your friends from school, college, and work; never posted selfies; and kept your kids, cats, and meals to yourself. You eschewed both fingerprint scan technologies and volunteering your DNA to ancestry databases, crept out by the potential abuses should that information slip into the wrong hands. No matter—your Global Profile will have all of that information and more, everything from the gait of your walk to the yogurt you eat only in the winter, thanks to technologies that gather up the details of your life without any effort on your behalf.

Though no one has outright control of your Global Profile—especially not you—take solace in knowing there are several organizations and institutions working hard to make your Global Profile the best surveillance tool it could be.

There’s the leader in the U.S. facial scan recognition market, Clearview AI, which currently services 10 contracts with federal government agencies, all of which gain access to the proprietary Clearview AI database. Using algorithms and artificial intelligence to scrape images off the internet anywhere a picture of a person might appear, Clearview’s on track to create a database of 100 billion images by year’s end, enough for 14 photos for every one of the 7 billion people on the planet.

—Sean Cooper
Over the past month, as the Russian army circled Ukraine tighter and tighter, I meekly tried to suggest to my parents to leave the provincial town they live in, one in which I was born and where I lived until my teenage years. My father, who is an accomplished Ukrainian journalist and the editor of a weekly newspaper was decisive: “It’s all just a complex political gambit. The conflict will all dissolve in the final minute, just like the Cuban missile crisis did.” My cousin who lives in Ukraine, and is a successful businessman, told me to cool off, too. He knew people who knew, he pointed out. It’s just an informational war. They are both very smart, and both understand regional politics far better than I do. They weren’t alone in thinking nothing would come of this.

This is what I understand today: Nobody in their right mind believes that they will find themselves in a state of war. How could they? Knowing wars exist, in theory, is one thing. But it’s impossible to fully grasp the possibility that it will come for you and for those you love. Especially in the Former Soviet Union, where every city, every single town and village I’ve ever been in contains innumerable monuments commemorating World War II. We grew up revering the veterans, and through their stories, were inoculated against wars, knowing with utmost clarity that nobody among us could possibly want this again. Nobody believes the war is coming until there are rockets flying, and running away is no longer an option. Ukrainian airports are bombed and there are no tickets to be bought. Gas stations are out of gas, cash machines are out of cash, and the Polish border is clogged for miles and miles with desperate refugees from the Eastern regions.

Nobody believes the war is coming until it is staring them in the face.

In the weeks leading up to the invasion I wearily watched some of my friends on social media change their profiles to include the blue and yellow Ukrainian flag, which came with the inscription: “I stand with Ukraine. Slava Ukrayini, Glory to Ukraine.” An easy show of solidarity, but I couldn’t bring myself to do that. For one, I don’t do flags, especially on Facebook: It brings back memories of flag-waving at the mandatory Soviet demonstrations. But it’s not just that. The Ukrainian flag as such reminds me of Ukrainian nationalism, which in turn reminds me why I left, and why so many other Jews left. The Ukrainian brand of nationalism had always come with a side dish of antisemitism. It’s not that I don’t “stand with Ukraine.” I do, and if not exactly entirely with, then maybe just a little diagonally. And that, I think, is what numerous Jewish immigrants from Ukraine all over the world are feeling right now: the bitter aftertaste of the motherland that systematically persecuted us, and the deep, heartbreaking concern for our numerous relatives, friends, and neighbors who stayed.

Being a Ukrainian Jew in America is not glamorous. In fact, it’s as opposite of glamour as it gets. It is never exoticized—not that anyone needs that, but wouldn’t it be nice to get some mileage or attention for your tsursis? No, you’re just another white American Jew, but with a funny accent and no generational wealth. I’ve always felt that the only cultural asset I am holding is my native fluency in Russian, which has given me intimate access to the greatest literature in the world. I have read Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, Gogol and Turgenev, Nabokov and Akhmatova in the original. It is every bit as glorious as you’ve heard it to be, and there are also innumerable others, lesser known in the West, but just as rapturous. Ukrainian literature, in contrast, always struck me as vastly inferior, and thus reflective of Ukrainian culture, too.

Then again: What do I know of Ukrainian literature and culture? I was 11 when the Soviet Union collapsed, and Ukraine became its own country. Our school curriculum was hastily assembled and included a play with explicitly antisemitic content. Having to read it out loud with the rest of my class finally and irreversibly cemented my understanding of the “real” ethnic Ukraine. I never gave it another chance after that. If I were to read an antisemically tinged book for pleasure, it better be a very good one: I’ll take Gogol and Dostoyevsky, but nobody lesser than that.

The cultured and educated people I knew in Ukraine all spoke Russian: Certainly all of the Jews did, and it wasn’t only because nearly all of the Jews I knew were well educated. My grandmother was a teacher of Russian language and literature. My aunt was a teacher of Russian language and literature. My teacher of Russian language and literature. I probably would have ended up as a teacher of Russian language and literature. My aunt was a teacher of Russian language and literature. My aunt was a teacher of Russian language and literature. I probably would have ended up as a teacher of Russian language and literature. Too, had I stayed.

Somewhere down the line it was communicated to me that people who spoke Ukrainian did so because they
were provincial, unsophisticated. On rare occasions when I met people who were brilliant and spoke robust, beautiful Ukrainian, I shrugged it off, thinking them either eccentric or crazy, or both. There was a term, zapodentsi, that loosely connoted nationalistically minded Ukrainians from somewhere far in the west of Ukraine, where the most nationalistic folks lived, and where we kept away from. It was a world I certainly wasn’t welcome in.

In recent years, though, it occurred to me: Was our obsession with Russian not related to what we call colonialism these days? Is it not the way for the empire’s culture to assert its domination—by causing the young and impressionable, passionate folk to fall in love with its cultural riches? To watch a Tarkovsky film in the original alone could make you want to be Russian. Perhaps Franz Kafka, though living in Prague, spoke German and wrote in German for the same reason we spoke Russian. It was the language of the empire and of its brightest minds. In the Soviet Union, it aligned us Jews with, however poorly implemented, the vision of brotherhood of all ethnicities. (The word “brotherhood” had far less valence in Ukraine after the fall of the Soviet Union.) Brotherhood implies peace, and it was both a hope, and, in retrospect, a colonialist machination.

Yes, Ukraine is fraught with contradictions: It was the underdog but had its own vicious pecking order; it was the province, but it moved toward liberal and democratic values in leaps and bounds; it was utterly corrupt, but its people were generous and kind. Now, under attack, all such calculations go out the window. I just desperately want the war to end, and we can detangle my grievances some other time, at our leisure.

Today, on the first day of the Russian invasion into Ukraine I was teaching a poetry class. It was the sort of class I would have wanted to start by talking about the significance of poetry, and the need for poetry. This need never felt more obvious, and more clear to me—a need for a poem that would feel like a prayer. And so, I shared “Wildpeace” by Yehuda Amichai:

Not the peace of a cease-fire, not even the vision of the wolf and the lamb, but rather as in the heart when the excitement is over and you can talk only about a great weariness. I know that I know how to kill, that makes me an adult. And my son plays with a toy gun that knows how to open and close its eyes and say Mama. A peace without the big noise of beating swords into ploughshares, without words, without the thud of the heavy rubber stamp: let it be light, floating, like lazy white foam. A little rest for the wounds— who speaks of healing? (And the howl of the orphans is passed from one generation to the next, as in a relay race: the baton never falls.) Let it come like wildflowers, suddenly, because the field must have it: wildpeace.

Amichai knew something about the desire for peace, and Benjamin and Barbara Harshav, who translated his פְּלִיפָרָה (FLIPRAH) into a neologism, “Wildpeace,” perfectly conveyed the sense of impossibility in Amichai’s poem, the intensity that rises above all possible ways to articulate this need and call for a brand new word. The poem starts by dismissing political realities and scriptural dreams. Instead, there is something so personal in the peace Amichai depicts: Nothing is more personal than one’s own exhaustion, and in the exhausted hallucination that is “light, floating, like lazy white foam.” And then, as an addendum—half-afterthought, half-revelation—Amichai adds the tiny second stanza and really nails it: It is a prayer and an inevitability. A vision of peace bursting forth.

May it come. Please, may it come.

This article was originally published on February 25, 2022.

Kyiv Kenasa
From the archives of Ukrainian Jewish Encounter

Besides the devastating human toll it promises, Russia’s bombardment of Ukraine also threatens architectural landmarks including Kyiv’s Karaite temple or Kenasa, an exquisite jewel box on Yaroslaviv Val Street not far from city’s famous Golden Gates. Completed in 1902, the baroque moorish structure was designed by a Roman Catholic Pole, Władysław Horodecki, and built by a Jewish contractor, Lev Ginsburg, both celebrated Kyiv residents in their day. According to the landmarks expert Mykhailo Kalnytsky, the exterior of the Kenasa changed over the past century, as did Ukraine.
YELETS WOMEN’S HIGH SCHOOL

A visit back to Russia, and an unceremonious encounter with the theatricals of the past

BY MAXIM D. SHRAYER

What was I hoping for, what was I expecting when I reacted with only a momentary sigh, with only a forlorn recollection to the fleeting phantom of my first love that passed before me?

—IVAN TURGENEV

Blood vessels of Russian classical literature saturate this story. The way capillaries do the vermilion border of human lips. And yet the American in me is having trouble with the traditional structure: The prologue juts out like the Habsburg jaw, the middle of the story bulges like a hernia, and the finale is missing entirely. Having resigned myself to the idea that life’s raw material dictates the rules of storytelling, I have decided to offer the account of these events exactly as they presented themselves. I have only disguised the names of a few participants.

It all started in Moscow in late autumn of 1985—the hardest year in our family’s post-War World II history. My parents and I had been living as Jewish refuseniks since 1979. But in November 1985 the Soviet secret police set in motion a new round of my father’s persecution. An ostracized writer and medical scientist, he was being accused of anti-Soviet activities, of spreading what the authorities called “Zionist” literature. Law enforcement officers delivered a summons from the office of the Moscow city attorney (“prosecutor,” in Soviet-speak) to our doorstep. My father went into hiding, but the terrible stress caused a heart attack and hospitalization at Moscow’s 4th City Hospital. Plainclothes agents came to interrogate my father on the intensive care floor. “If you want his death, go ahead,” an attending physician told them. The professional thugs wavered. Late at night my mother and I met with a bearded New York Times correspondent and passed him an open letter of protest.

Against the backdrop of my family’s tribulations, I continued to attend Moscow University, where I was a sophomore at the School of Soil Science. It was a place I didn’t appreciate enough for having given me, a Jew and a scion of refusenik activists, a salutary deferral from the military draft at the time when the country was still sending her young lads to slaughter in Afghanistan. That fall, I went through a spiral of misadventures triggered by my own efforts to break from natural sciences and enter the creative world, when my failed attempt to switch to a major in art history nearly resulted in my expulsion from the university. With much difficulty I was able to backpedal to soil science, but my position became more vulnerable and would so remain for another year and a half, until the Soviet authorities finally granted us permission to leave.

This brings me to January 1986. Just a few days prior, at my New Year celebration with a group of Soviet youths from the Jewish urban intelligentsia, there was spontaneous talk about the country’s new course of “liberalization.” Gorbachev having finally taken charge of the party, and of the appointment of Yeltsin, the country’s future dismantler-in-chief, as Moscow’s party boss. One of my pals, a student at the Institute of Oil and Gas (it was nicknamed “ink-blotter”) and a great fan of the Soviet chansonniers, whispered in my ear: “I heard on the Voice of America that Yeltsin isn’t a retrograde and certainly not an antisemite. And he even plays tennis.” Of course he did!

On the first freezing day of the spring semester, as I traversed the yawning vestibule of Moscow University’s main tower, I spotted an announcement: “Courses of the Directors of the People’s Theaters.” Below was the address of the university theater and the time of the interviews. At the time, I hadn’t yet learned to differentiate between life’s false messages and true signs of destiny. In the evening as my parents and I gathered for supper, I couldn’t stop talking about the announcement.

“Wouldn’t it be amazing if they accepted you?” said my mother.

“In the 1960s it used to be a good theater,” said my father. “Once I even talked with Rolan Bykov, who was then artistic director.”

“What about?”

“A comedy. About the discovery of smallpox vaccination,” my father explained.

“But what could I offer them?” I asked my parents. “My theatrical experience is negligible.”

“Don’t undersell yourself,” my father advised. “Hold on tight to the classics. They’ll always be by your side. Come up with some playwriting device. Propose to stage Pushkin. You’ll be fine; you’ll see.”

So on a wintry evening in the middle of January, I walked—ran—from the intersection of the former Gorky Street all the way down to Manège Square for my interview. This was my favorite of Moscow’s theatrical and musical routes: past the new stage of the Moscow Arts Theater, then the Theater on Malaya Bronnaya (formerly the State Yiddish Theater), the Mayakovsky Theater, and the Moscow Conservatory of Music (which students of my generation dubbed konserva, roughly “canned music.”) I reached the dimly lit bottom of Herzen Street, and there it was, the recessed corner building on the right side of the street.

tabletmag.com February 25–March 3, 2022 • 25 Adar I–1 Adar II, 5782
Four people conducted the interviews: Iosif Lopatkin, the theater’s artistic director; Vyacheslav Lozhkin, a playwright; Nikita Burkin, an acting coach; and Lubov Arkadievna Zalesskaya, a theater critic. They were enthroned in a chamber hall at a table draped with a velvet tablecloth the color of overripe cherries. Outside, roughly 20 of us waited in the hallway, mostly students from natural sciences, mathematics, and physics. I struck up a conversation with a tall, Varangian-looking fellow who kept rubbing a fur hat with tattered ear flaps between his hands. His name was Sergei Mezentsev, and he immediately told me his passion was Brecht and epic theater. Next to him stood a Levantine girl, whose name was Yulia Levina. The way they gazed at each other communicated that they were in love.

The committee invited the applicants in alphabetical order, which meant that, as always, I was at the bottom of the proverbial list—still lower in Russian (у) than in English (s). The examiners at the cherry-clothed table followed a script clearly rehearsed to tiresome perfection. Lopatkin asked the main questions. From time to time Lozhkin wedged in a hangman’s joke polished by many years of use. Burkin invited the applicant to do a quick stage study of a character from a Russian gaudy, the small overcautious freshwater fish from the classical tale by a Russian satirist, Nikita Burkin nodded with satisfaction.

“Would you like to recite a couple of your poems for us?” Lopatkin asked.

“Perhaps another time,” I answered.

At the end of the interviews Burkin came out of the chamber hall and read the names of the five lucky young men and one lucky young woman who had been admitted to the Courses of the Directors of the People’s Theaters. I was on the list. Classes would start at the end of January.

Almost immediately I knew that I hadn’t just wandered into an absurd theater of the country’s stagnation, but into a veritable late-Soviet freak show. There was no teaching plan whatsoever. Every Monday at 7 in the evening, the six of us appeared in the building of the university theater only to be passed through the same millstones. First Nikita Burkin would have us do a warm-up after Michael Chekhov’s system of acting technique. When he got carried away—and he always did—he’d start talking about a past production of Shakespeare or Racine. “When I worked at the Theater of the Moscow Soviet…,” he would start but then cut himself short. The names of the professional theaters where Burkin had worked changed constantly; the roles of Horatio or Orestes remained.

After that, Vyacheslav Lozhkin, his gaze lowered, would go on about his own theatrical accomplishments. Even inside the theater’s overheated space he did not remove his coat. His greatest success had been a production of his comedy at the Theater of the Soviet Army.

“You have no idea what went on. People would line up from the street corner to the box office,” Lozhkin spoke in a underworld basso voice. “And then they shut down the production.” Once he hinted that the creator of Ivan Denisovich himself had “looked favorably” at the idea of Lozhkin’s stage version of his short novel.

This brought us to the end of the meeting, when Lopatkin would announce: “And now Lubov Arkadievna Zalesskaya will tell you about the Stanislavsky system.”

Then Lubov Arkadievna would emerge from some secret room to deliver a monologue of her own. In each of her presentations, she would quote the phrase “to become the other while remaining oneself,” and this line struck me as contrary to what was happening with myself and thousands of other Jewish refuseniks.

Lopatkin usually sat at the table half-turned away from us. Thumbing his silk scarf, he coughed with affectation and furiously extinguished his papirosa. He never told stories, only giving us recommendations on what plays to read, exclusively by Western playwrights: “Pirandello, Anouilh, Dürrenmatt.”

To this day I don’t understand why Lopatkin and his associates even bothered with us. They already had a student troupe of young actors and actresses, all of them aglow with thespian love. And then there were the six of us, the inept directors of the people’s theaters, six escapists and runaways. But at the end of February 1986 Lopatkin announced that we should start thinking about “certification” in June of that year. Each of us would have to direct a short production—a one-act play, a scene from a full-length one or else an original stage adaptation. We had to present an idea to the quadrumvirate, get their blessing, and recruit performers from the university. Revisiting my Eugene Onegin proposal, I first suggested doing Tatiana’s vatic dream before the duel, but Lopatkin shot it down as “much too erotic.” Then I thought of Gogol’s Inspector-General.

“This is an eternal Russian story,” I spoke out. “Don’t you think very little has changed since the reign of Nicholas I? So why can’t we move the action to a provincial Soviet town someplace in central Russia? Dress the policeman in Soviet uniform? Instead of the
charitable hospital we’ll have a district clinic and so forth ."

““What about naked?” Lozhkin asked. “Forgive me, Vyacheslav Mikhailovich, what do you mean?”

“Can we have the civil servants naked on stage? Isn’t it what you mean?” Lozhkin asked and loudly blew his nose. “They will most definitely not allow naked actors on stage,” said the former professional actor Nikita Burkin.

It was becoming clear that the classical repertoire was not going to cut it. I had to come up with something more original. Without taking my father’s advice, I decided to propose a stage interpretation of “Light Breathing,” a novella by Ivan Bunin, who emigrated from Russia in 1920, settled in France, and in 1933 became the first Russian writer to win the Nobel Prize for literature. I admired his stories and also identified with his life in exile and his staunch anti-Bolshevism. And “Light Breathing,” a novella composed and published in 1916, the last prerevolutionary year, always had a spellbinding effect on me. I was hardly alone in thinking it a masterpiece of short fiction—Vladimir Nabokov considered “Light Breathing” an exemplary story. In some sense, the novella marked a breaking point of Russian classical literature—as though the “last Russian classic,” as Bunin would later crown the book, refused to surrender to the torrents of modernism.

The events linked to Bunin’s novella and its failed theatrical production would continue to haunt me for years, so perhaps a brief summary is in order. A meditation on life’s evanescence and the destructive powers of desire, “Light Breathing” follows three interconnected episodes from the short life of Olya Meshcherskaya, a high-school queen in a provincial Russian city. The story’s three main episodes are: Olya’s seduction by her father’s much older friend; Olya’s tense conversation with her headmistress; and Olya’s eventual murder by her lover, a Cossack officer.

At the heart of the interpretation of this novella that I proposed lay the idea that on stage the events of “Light Breathing” would be narrated not by Bunin’s authorial voice, but by the voices of other Russian classics named in the novella. Thus Shenshin, a student at the town’s classical high school who is in love with Olya Meshcherskaya, is the voice of the poet Afanasy Fet (an illegitimate son of the landowner Shen- shin). And Olya Meshcherskaya herself is a descendant of Prince Meshchersky, and thus the poet Gavrila Derzhavin, Pushkin’s great predecessor, would return from the dead, ascend the stage and speak of his old friend’s heiress. I described all of this quite colorfully at the next meeting, and only at the conclusion of my pitch did the devil make me boast my erudition:

“Incidentally,” I said, thinking that it had gone over very well. “Incidentally, in his late collection Dark Avenues, Bunin would give the last name Meshchersky both to the storyteller and his cousin, the giant whom Nathalie later marries...”

“How very elegant of him!” said Lubov Arkadiyevna.

I thought that even the misanthropic Lozhkin took to my idea.

Tossing a long gray lock off his forehead, Iosif Lopatkin turned first to me, lenses of his gold-rimmed spectacles ablaze, and screamed out: “Why in the world do you care so much about Bunin? The fascists stood at the gates of our motherland, and he sat in his maritime villa and wrote about naked arses.”

The discussion of my project was delayed. In the meantime, I decided to test the theater’s artistic director. At the next meeting I approached Lopatkin as he stood in the foyer, smoking, and asked in a quiet voice:

“Iosif Veniaminovich, a question. Are you Jewish?”

At first he was taken aback, but quickly recovered and replied so loudly that the actresses and actors standing in the theater foyer all turned in our direction: “I happen to be a Jew, as I believe you are as well. And he ...,” and Lopatkin spread his right arm in the direction of a tall actor with long Apollonian curls and eyes the color of prunes, “... and he is a Greek. And why does it really matter? In theater, young man, there is neither Greek nor Jew. Just people on stage.”

After this incident Lopatkin stopped acknowledging me. Out of inertia I continued to attend the Monday evening classes. A Moscow March had taken over the city and the streets filled with the smell of thawing earth. The other five future directors of the people’s theaters were already rehearsing their productions, and I was still hoping that Lopatkin would melt swords into ploughshares and allow my production of “Light Breathing” to go forth.

One evening at the end of March the phone rang at my family’s apartment not far from the Research Institute of Atomic Energy.

“This is Nikita Burkin speaking. I’m calling on behalf of the theater leadership.”

“Nikita Alekseyevich, was I expelled?” I asked, feeling something akin to relief. “Heavens no, quite the opposite. Iosif Veniaminovich Lopatkin requests that you join our admissions committee. We’re interviewing a new group of performers.”

“Forgive me, but why ask me? Don’t you know that they haven’t even approved my certification project...”

“Yes, but those are just temporary hurdles. You show promise. That’s why we’d like you to try your hand at selecting new actors.”

“Thank you, Nikita Alekseyevich. To be honest, I was contemplating the
Once again I found myself in the chamber hall of the university theater, facing the long velvet-covered table. On the table were a dusty carafe with water and a heavy ashtray (the kind Chekhov used). Gathered at the table were Lopatkin and Arkadievna clad in a purple shawl and a heavy ashtray (the kind Chekhov proposed to improvise a story about), into which the artistic director Lopatkin now chucked his vile papirosy. Gathered at the table were Lopatkin with a mane of silver hair and a paisley cravat; Lozhkin in a black leather coat of the sort worn by Gestapo officers in movies; Burkin in a brand-new, greenish-gray tweed jacket known in Russian as “split pea print”; and Lubov Arkadievna Zalesskaya clad in a plum-colored dress made of crepe mal; and recite a poem or prose excerpt.

“I have accepted a stage engagement there for the whole winter,” I sang out for some inexplicable reason, hurriedly explaining the order of the interviews. This time they were calling the 30 applicants not alphabetically but according to the posted signup sheet. Each student was asked to do three things: introduce themselves; do an impression of an animal; and recite a poem or prose excerpt.

At about 8 p.m. a tall young lady in a cornflower blue dress made of crepe de Chine entered the chamber hall. I could not say she was beautiful. But one immediately felt her breeding, a sense of finely cultivated origins. If I had seen such a young lady in the streets of Moscow, I would have first thought: “Wow she’s a tall drink of water.” And then I would have noted her slender legs, narrow ankles, broad shoulders, and the emerald glimmer in her eyes. And I would have probably wanted to meet her.

“Well, tell us about yourself,” Nikita Burkin suggested to the young lady, regarding her dress and matching blue shoes.

“My name is Olga Yeletskaya. I study law. More than anything in the world I love theater,” said the pedigreed but un-beautiful applicant.

“Do tell, are you descended from the princely house of Yeletsky?” Lubov Arkadievna asked, strange hope in her voice.

Suddenly Lozhkin remembered something and livened up.

“Nice town, Yelets. The Yelets Drama Theater was going to put on my comedy,” he barked. Lopatkin hungrily pulled dy,” he barked. Lopatkin hungrily pulled his papirosa but said nothing.

“And what kind of animal were you hoping to show us?” Burkin inquired.

“I will show you a steppe adder,” Olya Yeletskaya replied.

First she sat down on the parquet floor, then prostrated herself and lay motionless for about a minute. Very slowly she began to raise her head and untangle her right hand from the restraints of her body. The hand unfolded and gyrated in the style of a periscope. A hissing, which was actually quite credible, accompanied the ascent of the head and hand.

“A nightmare,” Lozhkin said rather loudly.

Olya Yeletskaya gracefully got up and bowed her head.

“That was ... That was ingenious,” Burkin said. “And what text will you be reading for us?”

“I shall read an excerpt from a novella by my favorite Russian writer. You will, doubtless, soon guess who he is. I would only like to add,” and Olya Yeletskaya pronounced these words in such a way that they sounded particularly authentic.

“I would like to add that the author was in love with my great-grandmother.”

“We’re all terribly intrigued,” Lubov Arkadievna said. “Go ahead, my dear, please read.”

I knew the source right away; the others had also recognized it before the excerpt gave away the title:

“In one of Papa’s books—and he has many ancient, curious ones—I read what kind of beauty must a woman possess ... You see, there’s so much there that I couldn’t remember it all: yes, definitely black eyes like boiling tar—I swear, that’s exactly what it said: like boiling tar!—eyelashes black as night, a tenderly playing blush, a thin waist, arms longer than average—you get it, longer than average!” Olya Yeletskaya read, smoothing the ruffles of her dress, “... a slender foot, a rather large chest, a neatly rounded calf, knees the color of seashell, downsloping shoulders—I have memorized much of it almost by heart, so it’s all accurate ... But the main thing, do you know what it is? Light breathing! And I have it, just listen to the way I take my breath, don’t I have it?” Olya Yeletskaya paused, as though she were listening to herself breathe.

At that moment Lopatkin slammed his open left hand on the table. “Again it’s Bunin! Enough! This is some sort of madness,” he was yelling, now turning to Olya Yeletskaya, now to me. “What in the world is wrong with you people? Don’t we have other writers besides your asinine Bunin?”

“Iosif Veniaminovich, my dear, you can’t do that,” Lubov Arkadievna spoke. “You’ll hurt the feelings of a young gifted actress.”

Olya Yeletskaya came closer to the examiners’ table. Her lips trembled.

“You will live to regret this,” quietly said to Lopatkin. Then she gracefully turned around on her little heels and ran out of the chamber hall.

I caught up with her at the Manège exhibition hall, the Kremlin’s crenelated walls looming ahead. Olya was sitting on the steps and weeping. Mascara trickled down her cheeks, forming a painting on her face. Winter boots jutted out of a brightly colored plastic bag of the sort many Soviet women carried along with a purse. Olya’s stockinged
feet were soaked from running in dress shoes over March street slush.

“You need to change. Now,” I said, trying to put on the air of an older, experienced man. “And don’t take this thing to heart. Big deal, some student theater…”

“For you it’s not a big deal… It’s not so much the theater but the way they treated me. How repulsive they are!”

“About that you’re right,” I said, sitting down on the steps next to Olya. “I’m probably going to leave this place soon.”

I told her about my fiascos, and also about “naked arses.”

“You’re brave,” Olya Yeletskaia said, tucking a braid of her hair under a hat of white mohair wool.

Wet snow started falling again.

“Let’s go,” I said to Olya. “I’ll treat you to some pancakes. There’s a place nearby, on Herzen Street. Maybe we’ll make it.”

After standing in line, we each ate a serving of pancakes with thin chocolate sauce and watery coffee. We stood at a round table by the window and stared at the city folk walking by outside.

“Listen, and about Bunin and your great-grandmother… Is it true?” I asked.

“Of course it is. Can you imagine making this up? I was even named after her.” “That’s pretty cool.”

“Have you ever been to Yelets?” it was Olya’s turn to ask.

“No, I haven’t had the occasion.”

“In Yelets the locals still call our old family mansion with columns the ‘Yeletsky house.’” “It’s on the former Manege Street,” Olya added.

It was closing time and the habitually angry pancake lady kicked us out of the café. Together we walked up Tverskoy Boulevard to Pushkin Square.

“Thank you, you’re very nice,” Olya said.

She kissed me on the cheek and ran down the steps into the metro station.

The following day, at about 10 p.m., Olya Yeletskaia telephoned.

“I didn’t wake you, did I?”

“My face looks familiar,” I replied. “It’s not quite sure…’January ’86, student theater… Remember now?”

They were Sergei Mezentsev and Yulia Levina, who were in the same cohort as I was at the Courses of the Directors of the People’s Theaters. The Varangian boy and Levantine girl who so adored Brecht…

Nothing should surprise an ex-Soviet, including the fact that in 1991 Sergei (who was not Jewish when I met him in Moscow) and Yulia (who was Jewish yet showed no interest in her origins) made aliyah and became settler activists.

“I sleep with a submachine gun,” Sergei said, smiling broadly.

“Do you remember us?” asked the bearded man.

“Your faces look familiar,” I replied.

“But I’m not quite sure…”

They told me they had five children.

“You know, we have your books at home,” Sergei added. Yulia quietly nodded. “Guys, what about your theater work?” I asked.

We stood in the middle of the library floor.

“By the way, do you remember Lopatkin, the artistic director?” I asked for no apparent reason.

“Of course we do, are you kidding?” Yulia said. “You left, but we ... we stayed and worked at the theater for three more years. As Lopatkin’s assistants.”

“Didn’t he become quite successful in the late 1980s?” I asked.

“He did. One of perestroika’s heroes. His was in charge of his own professional theater. Staged a play about Stalin that half of Moscow saw. Became a People’s Artist of Merit,” Sergei said with pride.

“And then,” Yulia added. “And then his life ended.”

We exchanged contacts and said goodbye. In the evening, when I got back to my hotel room in Rechavia, I looked up Lopatkin’s name and quickly came upon an announcement that in March 1999 “the distinguished figure of the Russian theater, director and teacher Iosif Veniaminovich Lopatkin was killed with a pistol shot in the entryway of his apartment building near Dynamo Stadium. The murder is under investigation. The funeral service will take place at the Church of All Saints.”

In the spring of 2019 I started to prepare for my annual summer trip to Russia. The third edition of my book about Bunin and Nabokov had just come out, and I was looking forward to readings in Moscow and St. Petersburg. For many years I had been bringing my daughters along on my summer pilgrimages to Russia, and it was the turn of Tanyusha, my younger one.

Every time we journeyed to Russia, I tried to show my daughters not only new parts of Moscow and St. Petersburg but also a slice of antiquated life, pockets of the past that had survived and remained more or less the same as I had once seen it as a university student, when I fell in love with rural Russia. This time I had decided on a trip to the places of Ivan Bunin’s youth, which lay in the Tula, Lipetsk, and Oryol provinces south of Moscow. I was contemplating a short biography of the great writer, and how could one imagine Bunin the teenager, Bunin the dropout from the classical high school, without traveling to the towns of Efremov and Yelets? I was even invited to give a talk in the Bunin museum in Efremov, in the former house of his older brother Evgeny.

Here I should explain that annual visits weren’t just an opportunity to show different parts of Russia to my daughters. For me these visits were also a return to my own childhood and youth—the lost joy of pure friendship I had experienced as a young person in the wrong place yet at the right time.

Joining me on the annual trips to one historic site or another were my dear friends Katya Kogan and Max Krolik, whom I’d befriended when we were children in the early 1970s. On our annual pilgrimages—to Dostoevsky’s Staraya Russia or to the Pskov Province where Pushkin had spent his northern exile—I felt not only like an American father and immigrant of many years, but also a teenager who had never parted with Russia.

So on a hot morning in July 2019 our party got into a large black SUV with three rows of seats, left Moscow, and drove south in the direction of Tolstoy’s ancestral lands. Our group comprised three generations. Katya, a philanthropist and founder of one of the first private nursing homes in Russia, was driving the black SUV. Next to Katya, a map in hand, sat Alechka, Max Krolik’s second wife, a screenwriter. Slouched in the second row were Krolik and I, sipping Old Königsberg, a Russian-bottled cognac, and chasing it with bitter Russian chocolate by the name of Vdokhno (Inspiration). My younger daughter, having claimed the whole third seat, was left to her own (electronic) devices. Katya, Krolik, and I were all in our 50s; Alechka was a little over 30; Tanyusha was 11. Three generations of those who travel by land ...

At around 1 in the afternoon we drove into Efremov, a tidy provincial town where decay didn’t hit you in the face and the air was scented with ironweed. The museum occupied a brick man- sard house, its walls the color of dark red coral.

An attractive woman wearing a white blouse and scarlet skirt ran out of the door and greeted us. She introduced herself as head curator.

“So happy you’re here,” she said. “We’ve all been on pins and needles. Everything is completely ready.”

We invited her to join us for lunch as our guest, and she replied, with much dignity: “Thank you, but I just got up from the table.” This sounded like a phrase from a faraway past.

About 60 people came to hear my talk. They included teachers, musicians, local authors, and even a regional benefactor of the museum, a man with a Germanic last name. A whole clan of Bunin’s relatives was also there in attendance, all of them resembling the writer himself.

I hadn’t enjoyed a talk so much in a very long time. First a trio of local musicians performed Astor Piazzolla tunes. Then the director of the museum spoke about my family, our lives before and after emigration, and showed photos she had found on the internet. It was very touching and only a tiny bit embarrassing. After the introduction I talked about the great rivalry of Bunin and Nabokov, and at the end Tanyusha and I signed copies of my books. There was only one jarring moment. During the questions, a female voice asked a question from the very back of the museum’s parlor:

“Professor, what is your position regarding the return of the Bunin papers from England to Russia, the great writer’s homeland?”

It was so crowded I couldn’t see the woman who posed the question. And I really didn’t feel like getting into it and upsetting the spirit of the gathering. I made an effort and replied:

“As far as I know, the Bunin papers were donated to Leeds University by the writer’s legitimate heirs. We’re here to celebrate the art of Ivan Alekseevich Bunin.” And that’s where I left it. The museum’s director, as far as I could tell, sensed my reluctance and steered the conversation away from controversy. Afterwards some of the guests and all the staff members went out into the courtyard to take a group photo. I sent Tanyusha ahead and lingered behind, hoping to take another look at the room where Bunin’s mother spent her last days.
“Excuse me, professor,” the head curator approached me. “I would like you to meet a great friend of our museum.”

I turned around. A tall stately woman of about 50 stood in the doorway. She wore an elegant if conservative skirt suit made of thin wool the color of ripe cherries. A cream high-necked silk blouse could be seen under her jacket. Her lustrous chestnut hair was carefully arranged into a double bun. A string of pinkish pearls hung around her neck. In her right hand, she held an expensive-looking briefcase of yellow leather.

The head curator ceremoniously introduced the tall lady:

“This is Olga Vikentievna Yeletska-
yay, senior state councilor of the Russian Federation. She does so much for the development of museums and archives in our country. And especially for Bunin’s heritage.”

“We’ve actually met,” said the lady from my Soviet past. “Don’t you recognize me, dear professor?”

“Of course, I do,” I answered.

“Oh forgive me please… I had no idea you knew each other,” the nice museum worker sounded flustered.

“We have long been following your publications, professor,” said Olga Yeletskaia. “We follow them, and we value the fact that even though you left Russia, you have remained a friend of Russian culture.”

She hadn’t, in fact, changed much, even though 33 years had gone by. She had the same air of imperial self-importance. I immediately thought of Hélène Kuragin’s “alabaster breast” from War and Peace. Hadn’t they taught us well in Soviet schools—all to their own detriment?

Luckily for me, my daughter ran into the room and pulled me into the courtyard, where the museum staff and local intelligentsia were posing in three undulating rows in front of the bust of Bunin. We came out of the museum annex and stood next to Katya and Krolik; Olga Yeletskaia followed and stood in the front row just left of Bunin.

At first I didn’t give much thought to Olga’s appearance on my horizon, just as I wouldn’t give much thought to dark patterns on the surface of the moon. I would certainly never have connected my talk at the Bunin museum with the restoration of an old theatrical story.

In the meantime we said goodbye to Efremov and its inhabitants and loaded into the black SUV.

“What was that all about?” Katya asked me.

“It’s practically a movie script: While traveling across rural Russia of Bunin’s youth, a Russian American writer encounters his old flame,” commented Alechka.

“Have a sip of cognac. Let’s toast your victory,” said Krolik, taking out the half-empty flat bottle and a new chocolate bar.

“Cut it out, people, seriously. What flame? If anything, she’s a flame extinguisher. To be honest, I’d forgotten all about her. Until now, that is…”

The crème-indigo-and-gold Ascension Cathedral soared over the ancient city of Yelets, our next stop. A band played in the town garden, where young ladies on dates with young men walked with pride and happy Russian families strolled the shady alleys. We were staying at the Larks Hotel on Lenin Street (the former Manège Street). The hotel was in a two-story stone mansion with a cast iron entrance and overhang. The mansion’s ornate window trim and eaves were painted white. Walking from the reception area toward a back staircase with carved balustrades, we saw, occupying a place of honor on the wall of the guest parlor, a large portrait of Stalin in the uniform of the marshal of the Soviet Union.

“Why do you have that painting here?” I asked the receptionist who was about to show us to our rooms. “This happens to be a painting by a local artist. Our owner collects them,” she replied. “Everything you see here on the walls is by local Yelets masters.”

“Excuse me,” Alechka inquired. “Could you tell us who the owner is?”

“You know, she doesn’t like to advertise her name…”

“Well, perhaps you could give us a hint?” I asked.

“This building used to be their ancestral mansion,” the reception lady answered with pride. “Our owner, she reclaimed it, had it all restored to its original design and prerevolutionary style.”

“And your Stalin, he’s also from before the revolution?” Alechka asked.

We decided to change and go out for dinner. I came down a few minutes before the others, removed the portrait of the murderer of nations from the wall, and placed it under the main staircase. Later in the evening, when we came back to the hotel after dinner, a different painting was hanging in place of Stalin’s portrait—a vase with golden elongated grapes, blushing apples and smoky pears.

“That was fast,” Krolik pointed out, and we parted until morning.

The following day was so full that I still don’t understand where I got the energy to go on a nighttime expedition which nearly led to a disaster. In the morning I gave a lecture at the local university—the I.A. Bunin Yelets State University, formerly a teachers college, before taking an extensive walking tour of Yelets and driving to the homesteads of Buturki and Ozyorki, which Bunin’s family once owned.

For me the tour started and ended at the Yelets Women’s High School. This doesn’t mean I ignored the town’s other attractions. I dutifully photographed the old cemetery which Bunin describes in “Light Breathing,” the cottage where
young Bunin lived as a boarder while attending the Yelets Men's Classical High School (which produced a number of distinguished graduates, including the future People's Commissar of Health Nikolai Semashko), and even the house-museum of the famous Soviet composer Tikhon Khrennikov. But for me the prism of the whole story, through which the prospect of an entirely different finale was revealed, was the Yelets Women's High School.

This edifice of three stories was built in the 1870s with such thought and care that it survived the revolution and Civil War, the wartime bombings of the town, and the peripeteia of postwar Soviet living. The workers college, which later grew into the teachers university, used to have its offices here. When we toured the former Yelets Women's High School, silence reigned in its halls—either a major renovation was about to start, or the former offices were moving to the main campus. I was most struck by the gorgeous one-piece, cast-iron staircase, its balustrades a masterwork of iron lace.

“How could they afford such fancy décor?” Katya asked our tour guide. “My dear lady, you probably don’t know this,” the guide answered with adorned pride. “Yelets used to be one of Russia's wealthiest small cities. Our grain merchants were famous all over the empire.”

We roamed around the building, entering former department offices and auditoria, now emptied of furniture. A young lady with “light breathing,” Olya Meshcherskaya in Bunin’s story, once attended this women’s high school. Something led me to a classroom, one of its long walls lined with tall bookcases with glass doors standing atop cabinets with solid wooden doors. Stored inside the glass bookcases were old teaching materials. I saw blazing red bindings and covers of old books. The bookcases and cabinets were not only locked with a key but also protected by horizontal strips of paper with stamped clay seals. I pulled on the door knobs of the cabinets and brushed my right thumb across the polished wood, collecting a thick layer of dust. I couldn’t shake the thought of undoing the locks, breaking the seals and getting inside the bookcases and cabinets. I realized it was sheer madness. And yet I knew I would find what I was looking for ...

In the evening, our party had a lot of vodka at dinner—more than I drink at home in America.

HOLIDAYS

Point your smart phone camera at the QR code to learn more about Jewish holidays.

In the evening, our party had a lot of vodka at dinner—more than I drink at home in America. When we got back to the hotel my daughter fell asleep right away, whereas I had an attack of insomnia. I read until late, and then I finally dozed off. When I woke up I wrote two notes by the light of the iPhone. One of them I placed on the side table by my daughter’s bed: “Tanyusha, if I’m not there when you wake up, go to Katya’s room. Love, Papa.” The other note, in Russian, was for Katya herself: “I’ll explain everything later. Stay with Tanyusha. Don’t leave the hotel without her. Kisses, M.” I quietly got dressed and left the room. On the way downstairs I placed the note under Katya’s door.

I stole into the basement, opened the mechanical room, took two screwdrivers and a pair of pliers and buried the tools in my deep side pocket. The screwdrivers and pliers jingled as I walked. It was about 10 minutes by foot from the hotel to the building of the former Yelets Women’s High School. The front door was locked. I looked both ways over my shoulder, removed a flat screwdriver from my pocket and jammed the lock open. I was surprised by the ease with which it gave. Having snuck inside the building, I ran down the corridor and entered the last classroom on the first floor. I stopped, catching my breath. Where to begin?

In one of the glass bookcases I saw a stack of bound notebooks. Breaking a slender lock, I started leafing through the contents. Those were senior theses by the philology students from the 1930s. Like a gambler, body hovering over the roulette table, desperate but unable to place his bet, I kept turning my gaze from one cabinet to the next. My hands were shaking. “What the hell is wrong with you? Stop before it’s too late,” I tried to reason with myself, but all in vain.

I kept breaking open the doors of the cabinets and examining their contents. There was a lot of curious stuff there—old textbooks, primers and dictionaries, some rulers, compasses and copper inkwells. But I was searching for something else, something I wasn’t finding. It was already 3 a.m. I was nervous about getting back to the hotel but couldn’t stop.

Three unopened cabinets remained in the darkest, farthest corner of the classroom, where neither the summer moonlight nor the glow of street lamps could reach. I sat on the floor in front of the remaining three cabinets, stuck the blade of the screwdriver under the heart of the lock and pulled on the door. On the middle shelf there were notebooks that looked old. In my head I called them “journals.” There were about 50 notebooks, and dusting off the covers, I was able to make out the names of the young ladies who attended the high school. Taking a chance, I pulled six notebooks from the middle, spread them before me and started examining them. I wasn’t surprised when I saw, written by a determined hand, the name “Olga Yeletskaya,” and the year, “1886.” The notebook was
half-filled with French passages, which would have taken me a while to read. At the end of the notebook I located a page folded into a corner. On the back of the corner: the words “Ваня Бунинъ” (Vanya Bunin) and beneath them, drawn in a fine ink pen, a cupid holding a bow and arrow. Four more pages followed, filled with small, elegant Russian lines and divided into paragraphs, each opening with a date. It looked like a diary, hidden in the depths of a school exercise notebook. I took out my iPhone and, feeling something like ecstasy, photographed the title page, the leather binding, the corner, and the drawing with the name of the great Russian writer above the flying cupid. Having made sure that the flash worked sufficiently, I began the scanning of the diary pages.

Suddenly a blinding light washed over me from above. I turned and saw Olga Yeletskaia, frozen in the classroom doorway. Over the cherry business suit she wore a beige belted trench coat with epaulets. Two gaping police officers, a lieutenant and a sergeant, stood behind Yeletskaia’s back.

“Well, professor, just as expected,” she said loudly. I was silent, my eyes still adjusting to the light after several hours in the dark.

“Did you think you were getting away with this?” Yeletskaia asked.

“I wasn’t thinking anything,” I answered. “I just wanted to know the truth behind the fiction.”

“And so now you do!” she said in a triumphal voice.

“Go ahead,” she ordered the policemen, her voice vibrating with power. “Start the processing protocol. Forced entry. Broken front door lock. Broken bookcases and cabinets. And don’t forget the fingers…”

“Olya, do you remember how back in ’86 you did an impression of a steppe adder?” I asked, addressing her with the familiar ty pronoun.

“Leave us,” she ordered the two policemen. “Close the door and wait outside.” Olga Yeletskaia approached me, softly stepping on the old parquet floor.

“Why did you come here?” she asked.

“Why would you even want to go back to Russia? We don’t need you here, do you understand? We-do-not-need-you.”

“Yes, I understand, Olga Vikentievna, I understand everything,” I said and suddenly felt with the utmost clarity that I had to escape from there and rescue my child, no matter the cost. “Hand me your phone, professor,” said Yeletskaia.

She erased all the photos and scans of her great-grandmother’s notebook before she handed the phone back to me.

“By the way, I hadn’t finished reading your great-grandmother’s diary,” I said.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Now give me the notebook,” Olga Yeletskaia ordered me.

She lowered the book into her briefcase, closed the clasps, and smiled with malice.

“You took pity on me back in 1986,” she said. “At that idiotic theater audition. And then you took pity on me again—when you turned me down. Now we’re even, professor, doubly even. Go, I’m not keeping you.”

“Aren’t you going to bring up the Jews who abandoned Russia on the brink of disaster?” I asked, unable to hold back.

“I was raised not to say certain things out loud,” Princess Yeletskaia sliced. “Go now!” Legs wobbly, I walked toward the door. My hand already on the ornate door handle, I turned back and asked Yeletskaia:

“And the notebook, you’ll surely hide it in some secret vault? Or will you destroy it?” Olga Yeletskaia, senior state councilor of the Russian Federation, turned her gaze from the bookcases and cabinets I had broken to the yellow windows of the former Yelets Women’s High School.

“Leave and do not come back,” she said sternly. Then she looked me in the eye and added “Ever!”

I walked past the police officers and ran down the streets of Yelets. Tanyusha was still asleep when I arrived in the hotel, innocent of her father’s transgressions. I set the alarm for 8 a.m. and fell back asleep.

At breakfast I announced to my friends that something very strange had happened overnight and our plans had changed.

“I’ll tell you everything, but a little later. Now just trust me, my dears. This is for the better…”

We packed hastily, forgetting a gift bag with the lace of Yelets on the table in our hotel room. We loaded into the black SUV and sped off, but not to the great city of Oryol, where we had been planning to conclude our journey through Bunin’s Russia, but back to Moscow. The next morning my daughter and I left on the first flight to Amsterdam.

This article was originally published on March 1, 2022.
**Israeli Chicken Soup**

**BY JANNA GUR**

### INGREDIENTS

- 2 lbs (1 kg) chicken parts (especially wings) or 1 whole chicken
- 1 turkey neck cut into a few chunks
- 1 large bunch dill
- 1 large bunch parsley
- 5-6 stalks celery with leaves
- 1 large onion
- 3 carrots, halved lengthwise
- 1 leek cut into large chunks
- 1 celery root, peeled and quartered
- 1 parsley root (or parsnip) peeled and halved lengthwise
- 2 zucchini or summer squash cut into large chunks
- 1 fennel bulb, trimmed and quartered
- 1 lb (450 g) pumpkin or butternut squash cut into large chunks
- 1 whole tomato
- 1 teaspoon whole peppercorns
- 3-4 berries allspice
- 2-3 bay leaves
- Salt to taste

### PREPARATION

**Step 1**

Line the bottom of a large soup pot with half the herbs. Arrange chicken and turkey as well as the vegetables over the herbs and pour in about 4 quarts/liters of cold water. Add whole peppercorns, bay leaves and allspice berries.

**Step 2**

Bring to a boil on medium-high heat, and patiently skim any foam that floats up to the surface. Reduce the heat to low, and simmer partially covered for 1 1/2 to 2 hours. If you plan to use the chicken for other recipes (salads, sandwiches), remove it from the soup after an hour and half, so it retains its texture and succulence.

**Step 3**

After the soup has simmered for about an hour, taste and add salt to your liking.

**Step 4**

Tie the rest of the herbs in a bundle and add to the pot for the last 5 minutes.

**Step 5**

Cool the soup to room temperature, discard the herbs and strain. Keep the meat and any vegetables you might want to serve with the soup (especially carrots, zucchinis and pumpkin) in separate containers.

**Serving suggestions:**

Add one or more of the following:

- Cooked chicken meat (from the soup) removed from the bones and shredded with hands into little pieces
- Freshly chopped dill
- Chunks of cooked vegetables (from the soup)
- Vermicelli or other small noodles (boiled separately according to instructions on the package and added to the piping hot soup at the last moment)

**Yield:** serves 10-12