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The Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry publishes commentary and analysis on Jewish identity and culture. You are welcome to share your thoughts on our Perspectives with us: cst@tauex.tau.ac.il. We are glad to share with you the seventeenth issue of Perspectives.

Man of the Year

How a young Jew saved civilization

Uriya Shavit

Thanks to Philip Roth and his alternative history, Charles Lindbergh is remembered today as the would-be fascist president of the United States as much as for being the first pilot to cross the Atlantic in a non-stop solo flight.

Lindbergh was also the first person to be picked as Time Magazine's Man of the Year, and the reason why this journalistic tradition began.

In December 1927, the editors found no worthy news story to put on the cover. They remembered that they failed to have a Lindbergh-related cover story throughout the year. To remedy two embarrassments, they made Lindbergh Man of the Year without investing much thought or effort in the project.

As the decades went by, Man of the Year picks – or Person of the Year, as of 1999 – became more commercialized and peculiar. I doubt even enthused sports fans still

remember Peter Ueberroth, Man of the Year 1984. The person who shaped 2001 was, no doubt, Osama Bin Laden, but the editors feared his face on the cover would be too bitter a pill for the readers and chose Rudy Giuliani instead.

This year, the task of Time Magazine editors could not have been easier. Giving King Charles III yet another reason to be grumpy, they will choose Volodymyr Zelensky as Person of the Year 2022.

And what a year, and what a man, will that decision mark.

History is a science, if it is a science, that does not allow repeating an experiment. Yet to truly appreciate the dramatic role the president of Ukraine has played in defending civilization against barbarism, a “what if” is essential.

Had Putin’s plan to take over Ukraine prevailed, we would have lived in a very different and dangerous world. The whole of Europe would have come under the bullying domination of a fascist regime, NATO and American leadership of the West would have crumbled, and liberal democracy would have become an ideology in deep retreat, as in the 1930s.

Zelensky’s resolve and courage prevented these frightening scenarios from happening. And they did more. The young Ukrainian president, a husband and a father, taught a self-indulged generation of Westerners that freedom is priceless yet does not always come for free. He demonstrated that media-savvy liberals can be tough fighters when liberty is at stake. He showed that being cool – to use a pre-millennial word – can be a means rather than an end.

Zelensky is a historical figure comparable to Churchill, and is, in some ways, more impressive.

Churchill came to power with life-long military and political experience; Zelensky was a comedian and producer before being elected president in a remarkable turn of events that saw a television series anticipate and create reality. Churchill made some fatal mistakes as a commander; Zelensky’s record, for now, is almost impeccable. Churchill resisted fascism against all odds; the same goes for Zelensky, yet he faces a much superior nuclear power.

The man who transformed 2022 from a catastrophe to a promise is Jewish. This is not the defining aspect of his identity, but it is part of it, giving Jews, wherever they are, a reason for pride.

The pride is compromised by the shameful neutral position taken by Israel and by some Jewish organizations from the outset of the war.

The moral and strategically wise thing to do would have been to unequivocally align with the forces of good and recognize the new rise of fascism in Europe for what it is. It is late, but perhaps not too late, to still do so unequivocally and wholeheartedly, or Jews will have a hard time in years to come criticizing the silence and neutrality shown by others in dark days.

As did the Israeli-Arab wars, the humiliation of Putin in Ukraine is demonstrating the superiority of Western weapons systems and intelligence to that of Russia.

To a large extent, Israel is the strong country it is because it has been an integral part of the liberal West. It must remain so and must not leave a single American or European with doubts as to where it belongs.

Urgent, even if discreet, efforts should have been invested in encouraging Russian Jewry to emigrate long ago. Nothing good awaits Jews in Russia. That's one of the reasons why the State of the Jews was established in the first place: so that a safe home will always await the diaspora in hours of need. Where fascism rules, religious minorities can never be truly safe.

The war in Ukraine revealed the ugly faces of some in the West. They should all be held accountable.

These include the wise, the evil, the naïve and the ignorant.

The wise: Journalists and professors who dedicated their entire careers to explaining how clever Putin is. Throughout 2022, they kept offering sophisticated excuses for each of the miscalculations committed by this Nasser-like despot of big-talk and battlefield incompetence. If Putin had committed suicide, they would have explained he was planning a resurrection.

The evil: Disguised as anti-progressives, they could not conceal the pleasure they take in seeing liberal institutions and values at peril. It was discouraging to see throughout the year that not a small number of such Putin-admirers live in Israel.

The naïve: People who thought they can maintain, at the same time, good relations with a fascist regime while enjoying the protection of the liberal systems it seeks to destroy. They will most likely end up with neither.

The ignorant: Good-hearted appeasers, who learned history but have not learned from history. They proved incapable of understanding what is at stake and how the minds of despots work (a few months ago, I read an essay by a well-known Israeli historian who suggested, though not in so many words, that the West give in to Russia. My spontaneous reaction was: Thank heavens we did not have him negotiate with the Palestinians! Then I remembered that we actually did).

Putin wanted to be remembered as a Peter the Great II. With his messianic zeal for the unification of an imagined volk, anti-liberal conspiracy-tormented mind, disconnect from the limitations of his strength, and total disregard for human life and dignity, he will end up somewhere between Bin Laden and Hitler, depending on how long he will survive and how much more damage he will be allowed to inflict on his people.

It has been said time and again during 2022 that Russia is on the wrong side of history. But history does not have sides. People do.

From Chechnya to Syria and then Ukraine, the scope of crimes against humanity Putin committed and enabled makes him the worst war criminal the world has known since World War II.

The sad reality is that the only immediate way out of the crisis is for a few good people from Putin's inner circle to do the right thing, then pretend the invasion was entirely

his doing. Any other scenario will result, at best, with tens of thousands of additional innocent victims.

The evil that men do lives after them. No good will be interred with Putin's bones.



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