

Special report: China and the Uyghurs Katie Stallard • John Simpson • Elif Shafak

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The Edge of War

Can the West stand up to Putin and avert catastrophe?

Bruno Maçães | Andrew Marr | Andrey Kurkov | Jeremy Cliffe



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A turning point in history

When the writer Stefan Zweig was holidaying on the Belgian coast in July 1914, in the uncertain interlude between the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and the outbreak of the First World War, he marvelled at the contrast between the multinational crowds of relaxed holidaymakers and the increasingly ominous newspaper headlines. “It seemed to me utterly absurd,” he wrote, “that while thousands and tens of thousands of Germans were enjoying the hospitality of this neutral little country, there could be a German army stationed on the frontier ready to invade.”

While 2022 is, of course, not 1914, something similar to the atmosphere of that historic summer is in the air now. “The giant wheel turns,” writes Andrew Marr on page 14. “Here we are again.” Once more it seems the world is at a turning point. Yet as Bruno Maçães writes in his report from Kyiv on page 20, life in the Ukrainian capital continues largely as usual. The same is true of Moscow and, for that matter, in cities across the continent. Most Europeans are more concerned with the long slog out of the Covid-19 pandemic than the risk of war. The gulf between that normality and the threatening headlines grows wider daily.

Earlier this month around 130,000 Russian soldiers were massed close to Ukraine’s borders, before Vladimir Putin confirmed a “partial” withdrawal on 15 February. The US and its allies are warning of an imminent invasion and Western embassies are urging their citizens to leave Ukraine while they still can. American officials quoted by the US broadcaster PBS fear a “horrific, bloody campaign that begins with two days of aerial bombardment and electronic warfare, followed by an invasion, with the possible goal of regime change”.

On 15 February Russia announced that it was withdrawing some of its troops from the Ukrainian border. This may suggest that instead of an immediate invasion, Vladimir Putin plans a longer campaign of coercive pressure on Ukraine in his quest to wrench the country back from its westwards course. But any withdrawal will have to be seen to be believed. And even then, it may merely postpone the hour of conflagration.



US estimates suggest that Russia could decapitate the government in Kyiv within two days and displace up to five million Ukrainians

If not, and the Russian attack is swift, then all bets are off. Not because the balance of power is uncertain: Moscow’s military budget is about ten times that of Ukraine, and Nato will not intervene directly against Russian forces. US estimates suggest that Russia could decapitate the government in Kyiv within two days, cause up to 50,000 civilian casualties and make up to five million Ukrainians refugees. This would make such a conflict the biggest crisis in Europe since the end of the Cold War – presenting the West not only with a security emergency but also, as Jeremy Cliffe argues on page 19, a political and moral obligation to impose severe sanctions on Putin and his kleptocratic regime.

But in truth no one, not Putin nor Ukraine’s president Volodymyr Zelensky nor Joe Biden nor Boris Johnson, really knows where such a conflict would lead. How stable would any Kremlin puppet government in Kyiv prove? What sort of resistance and partisan warfare would Ukrainians mount? (Historical and anecdotal evidence suggests it would be substantial.) How would Western sanctions affect Putin’s position within Russia and globally? Might they even destabilise his regime?

Those are just the immediate questions. Others are yet wider and more potentially era-defining. How would Russia respond to the inevitable Nato troop reinforcements in eastern member states such as the Baltics, Poland and Romania? What sparks could fly from a Ukrainian warzone in the direction of other tinderboxes such as the Balkans, where a fragile peace already appears to be breaking down? What might be the knock-on effects of a huge movement of refugees into the EU? Would Russian subjugation of Ukraine encourage China in its own designs on Taiwan?

The year 2022 is not 1914. It is entirely conceivable, however, that it too will go down in history as a turning point – as one of those years that functions not just as a measure of time but also as a watershed between one era and another. A year mentioned in the same breath as not just 1914 but also 1789, 1848, 1939 and 1989. But a turning point preceding what? The domino chains of possibilities are as multitudinous as they are unsettling. Only a fool would answer that question with any confidence. ●



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IN THIS ISSUE

9

What's next for the Met?

Megan Nolan on the future of a beleaguered force

11

It's goodnight from me

Stephen Bush writes this week's Diary

20

As the world watches

Bruno Maçães and Andrey Kurkov report from Kyiv

42

Another brick in the wall

Adam Kirsch on the Stasi's creative writing class

48

Writing the Uyghurs

Anoosh Chakelian meets Fatimah Abdulghafur Seyyah

54

Angry young men

Rachel Cooke on *Louis Theroux: Forbidden America*

62

Prodigal son

Maxim does the NSQ&A

25

The Silencing

A special report on China and the Uyghurs featuring:
Katie Stallard and John Simpson on Xinjiang
Elif Shafak on apathy and autocracy
Rian Thum and Musapir on a culture under attack



Persecuted: how the Uyghurs became a target of Xi Jinping



Maxim on music and memories



Dispatches from Kyiv

MORE IN THIS ISSUE

Up front

- 3 Leader
- 17 Correspondence

The Notebook

- 9 Megan Nolan on the failings of the Met police
- 11 Stephen Bush writes this week's Diary
- 12 Freddie Hayward meets the French social historian Ivan Jablonka

Columns

- 14 Andrew Marr on Britain and the Ukraine crisis
- 18 David Gauke on the Tories' reluctance to oust Boris Johnson
- 19 Jeremy Cliffe on why the West must challenge Putin
- 33 Elif Shafak on the Uyghurs and Western apathy
- 38 Louise Perry on the exploitation of sex scenes

Features

- 20 Bruno Maçães and Andrey Kurkov report from the Ukrainian capital
- 26 Katie Stallard introduces a special report on the silencing of the Uyghurs
- 30 John Simpson on Beijing's persecution of Xinjiang
- 34 Rian Thum and Musapir on the story of Uyghur culture

The Critics: Books

- 40 Bruno Maçães on *Reality+: Virtual Worlds and the Problems of Philosophy* by David J Chalmers
- 42 Adam Kirsch on *The Stasi Poetry Circle: The Creative Writing Class That Tried to Win the Cold War* by Philip Oltermann
- 44 Katherine Cowles on *Love Marriage* by Monica Ali
- 45 Reviewed in short

The Critics: Arts

- 48 The exiled poet Fatimah Abdulghafur Seyyah talks to Anoosh Chakelian and shares new poems on the Uyghur experience
- 53 Film: David Sexton on *Cyrano*
- 54 TV: Rachel Cooke on *Louis Theroux: Forbidden America*
- 55 Rachel Cunliffe on *Political Animals*

The Back Pages

- 57 Gardening: Alice Vincent
- 59 Deleted Scenes: Pippa Bailey
- 61 Crosswords and Subscriber of the Week
- 62 The NS Q&A: Maxim

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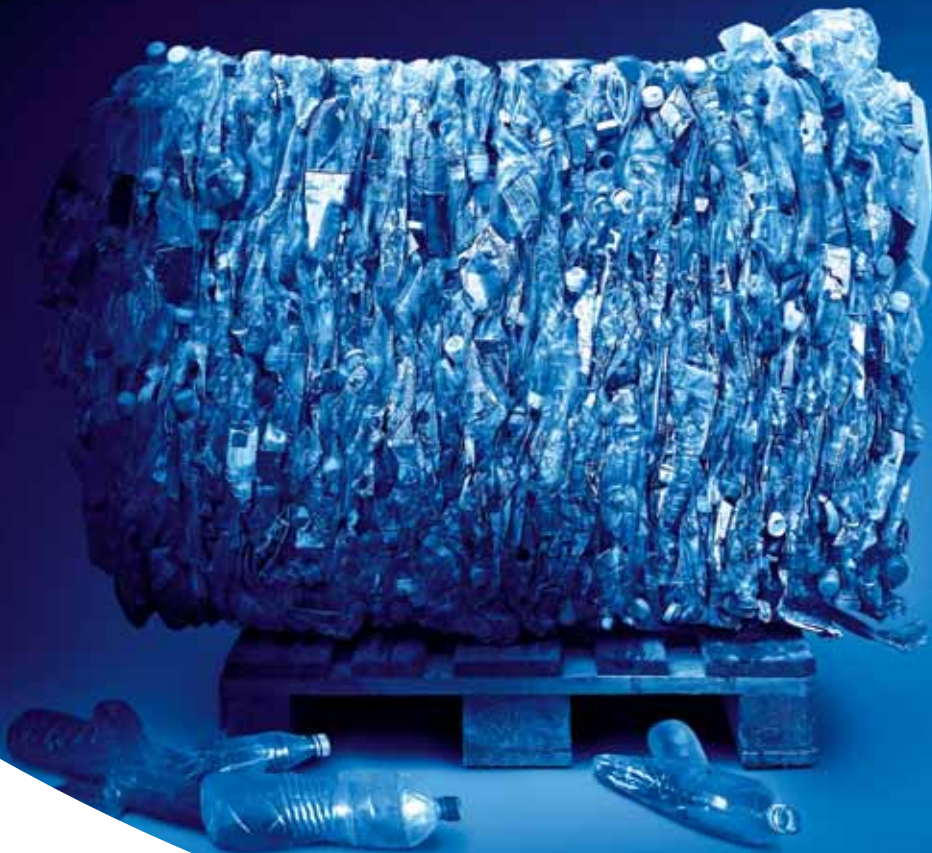
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THE NOTEBOOK



DANIEL LEAL/AP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Newsmaker

Can the next Met chief
detoxify the force?

By Megan Nolan

A few weeks ago, in a climate of increasing disgust towards the failings of the Metropolitan Police, I came across a viral infographic about the killing of Jean Charles de Menezes in 2005. The infographic retold the shocking sequence of events that led to the fatal shooting of de Menezes by Met police officers who had mistaken him for a suicide bomber. The infographic highlighted that the commander of the operation which led to de Menezes' death was none other than Cressida Dick.

Rather than face any personal consequences for her role in de Menezes' killing, Dick's career continued to advance until she became Commissioner of the Met in 2017. The years after her appointment were defined by a series of revelations, not just of incompetence in her force but of pervasive and active wrongdoing by her officers that was often motivated by bigotry. Now, at long last, Dick has been forced to resign. It is amazing how long she avoided doing so, and how long her

◀ arrogant dismissal of systemic failure was able to prevail. Similar to politicians, it often seems that the police can withstand obvious ineptitude, the equivalent of which would get you fired in other lines of work.

When I worked in administration for a medical office in my early twenties, there was once a sweep of our computers (or at least the threat of one) following some minor communication catastrophe. I dreaded that it would be revealed that on Fridays my colleagues and I would sometimes joke about how desperate we were to clock off. I was concerned that this flippancy would be offensive to my seniors, make me look foolish and unprofessional and would convey an indifference to the people to whom we provided services. That's how I felt at 22, in a temp job which I had no ambitions for and which wasn't public-facing.

All of which is to say that the sexist, racist, ableist, Islamophobic messages sent between officers, which were recently made public via a damning Independent Office for Police Conduct report into the culture of misogyny and racism at the Met, are striking not only because of their deeply disturbing content. They reveal grossly overconfident and entitled attitudes towards a workplace. Sadly for us, that workplace is one supposedly central to maintaining public safety.

The messages show, among other things, an officer bragging about hitting his girlfriend, an officer telling a female colleague he would happily rape her, and jokes about killing black children. They were sent in a group of 19 officers mostly based at Charing Cross Police Station. The Met has denied that the messages represent a substantive organisation-wide problem, and is again sticking to its tried-and-tested response that

The Charing Cross scandal is reflective of the rot that has come to characterise the Met

this is the behaviour of a “few bad apples”. This approach made more sense in the case of Wayne Couzens, the Met officer who abducted and murdered Sarah Everard. As far as we know, he is the only British police officer to have recently murdered a woman not known to him for his own sadistic pleasure. (Although 15 other women have been murdered by police officers since 2009, they were all intimate partners or, in one instance, the mother of the officer in question.)

Many, however, saw Couzens's behaviour as inextricably linked to his policing, in so far as he abused his power as a police officer to detain Everard, and this arrogance was a result of the omnipotence that is bestowed upon the police. It is true, however, that few policemen have committed such a horrific crime as Couzens, but perhaps this is because so few people are murderers at all.

It is laughable to suggest, however, that the Charing Cross group are not reflective of the increasing rot that has come to characterise the Met. Nineteen men, mostly based in a single station. That is not a negligible presence. In the timeframe these messages were sent, 2016-18, how many women entered that station looking for help, unaware of the sort of men they were engaging with – men who revel in cruelty against women instead of working to stop it? Some of the officers reportedly defended their words as “banter”, that trusted catch-all that has been used since time immemorial to cover up genuine hatred. The “banter” defence, just like the “bad apples” defence, is a deliberate attempt to soften the true intention behind these communications.

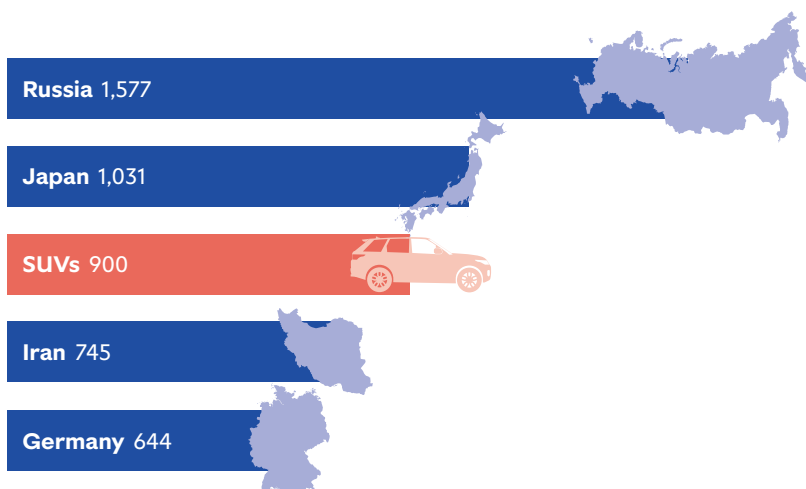
In the grand scope of human history, who has tended to be at the hard end of oppressive controls and whose attempts at autonomy have been systemically quashed? The answer is women and ethnic minorities. The police are handed unequivocal power over society: can we really expect the Met to change now that a few of its officers have been fired or disciplined?

What is exhausting about disgusting incidents such as the behaviour uncovered at Charing Cross Police Station – which tells us that the people who have power over us view us as less than human – is that there is never a resolution. Firing individual officers alters nothing: it will only either further embitter their like-minded colleagues, or teach other officers to use a better encrypted messaging service. Cressida Dick leaves the force at a time when the Met is still denying a culture of sexism exists within it, but even if it did acknowledge the truth, what would change?

The reality is that these problems will only ease when the general ethos of policing changes. As things stand, police officers are essentially taught from the start that they are better than the people around them. They are given extraordinary powers – and the Police, Crime and Sentencing Bill, now in its final stages, will extend these powers even further – and unearned moral authority. Should we be surprised when that authority is abused and doled out inappropriately? Until policing is reconfigured at its roots as a community-serving and community-led endeavour, nothing will change. ●

Chart of the Week

If SUVs were a country they would be the world's sixth largest CO2 emitter
National carbon emissions (millions of tonnes)



Source: International Energy Agency

The Diary

My time as political editor is over, and I'm shaking up a seven-year routine

By Stephen Bush

I have *Doctor Who* on the brain a lot at the moment – more so than usual. One reason for this is that Jodie Whittaker's time in the Tardis is almost up and, like most fans, I am nervously excited to discover who the next Doctor will be.

Another reason is that, like a Doctor at the end of their tenure, I am contemplating my own looming exit from a job I've loved: in my case, being political editor of the *New Statesman*. By the time you read this, I will have completed my regeneration into Andrew Marr – I just hope that I've managed to bow out with something light but apposite.

It's a particularly strange experience being replaced by one of your heroes – a hero with a cameo appearance on *Doctor Who*, no less – because one of the things you're supposed to do during your transition period is show your successor the ropes, which in this instance would be rather redundant. I would ask him to show me, but alas, my new employer, the *FT*, frowns on industrial espionage.

Drunk and dissolute

The other reason I have *Doctor Who* on the brain is that Tom Baker, who played the role from 1974 to 1981, gave a stupendous account of his working life to the *Times* in 1978. It begins with the immortal opener: "You could say that yesterday was fairly typical of a day in my life when we're not recording *Doctor Who*. I woke up at 5.15am in a cork-lined room in Soho and then got into bed. But where am I?"

When I gave my notice, the editor, Jason Cowley, asked me to write the diary in my final week. I had originally planned to talk about what I think we're trying to achieve with our political coverage here at



The greatest joy of working at the NS has been hearing from the kind, funny, thoughtful readers

the NS, but the new fella has already done that perfectly: "to listen intently and explain clearly – and by doing that, to give readers a more convincing map of the way power is working". So there really is nothing to do but to give an account of how I've tried to do this, if not as memorably as Tom Baker did in 1978.

As I woke up one morning

Like an actor leaving a TV show, I know how my exit will play out because I've read the script: I will wake up to the sound of Petroc Trelawny on BBC Radio 3's *Breakfast* programme. One reason why is that I find the news breaks on music radio a good way of parsing what a story "really" means and how it is being heard: although a lot of people listen to the *Today* programme, very few of them are genuine swing voters. Another reason is simply that I like music radio and have, over the years, constructed an elaborate series of justifications about why I should be able to start my morning listening to it.

After reading the papers to the sound of classical music, I will write our daily morning newsletter, *Morning Call*, for the last time. Usually when I start writing I switch from Radio 3 to 6 Music, or to a new record: in recent weeks, I have written mostly to Black Country, New Road's *Ants From Up There*, though I think it's likely that on my last day I will listen to Sea Power's *Everything Was Forever*. I'll file that last newsletter, record my last *New Statesman Podcast* and that will be that, barring a long lunch and a lot of cocktails.

Talking back

The third reason I prefer to start the day with classical music is that I am not a morning person, and I need the gentle sound of music to jolt me out of my fug. Yet the thing I will miss most of all about my time at the NS is writing *Morning Call*. Why? In part because putting together an email newsletter is a lot like the joys of putting together a newspaper or a magazine: here is a (sometimes) concise and (occasionally) helpful digest of what you need to know. I sincerely believe that the NS will continue to exist in print and not just in a digital form, precisely because people enjoy having something curated for them, rather than having to find it themselves on social media or a website.

The main reason I enjoy writing newsletters, though, is that people write back – and *New Statesman* readers are some of the kindest and most thoughtful people you could meet. These emails have made me laugh, cheered me up and changed my mind: they have been, in general, the greatest joy of my time working here. My only regret is how bad I've been at replying to them, particularly in recent weeks, when every kind email makes me feel a deep sadness that I won't be at the NS to receive them much longer.

Just as fans carry "their" Doctor with them forever (my Doctor is Paul McGann), I will always carry the memory of the many kind messages from NS readers with me – and, as I await the beginning of my next adventure, I also look forward to joining one of the nicest groups of people around: *New Statesman* subscribers. ●



Encounter

“Men are trapped in a gender prison”
Ivan Jablonka on defining modern masculinity

By Freddie Hayward

During his childhood, the French social historian Ivan Jablonka rarely saw his father cook. It was a traditional and sometimes unhappy family set-up. His father worked as a nuclear physics engineer and his mother taught literature at a secondary school. While his father would occasionally change Ivan's nappies, as a husband he wouldn't share in the household chores. When he was upset, he sometimes turned violent and beat his son.

Speaking to me from his home study in Paris, Jablonka told me his father was orphaned by the Holocaust. “His parents – my grandparents – were murdered during the Second World War, and as an orphan he embodied this figure of masculine vulnerability.” This complicated Jablonka's childhood because he was both under the influence of a traditional male role model and aware of his father's shortcomings. “I could feel that as an orphan my father was weak – he was fragile; he was weak.”

After the publication in 2019 of Jablonka's book, *Des hommes justes: Du patriarcat aux nouvelles masculinités*, his father, who is now aged 82, visited him. “My father came to me and said: ‘You know, I think that I was a “problem father”.’ This expression was interesting,” Jablonka told me. “He meant not only a father who had personal problems, but also a father for whom

JOEL SAGET

masculinity itself was a problem. And I inherited this reflection.”

With his silvery hair swept to the side and wearing black-rimmed glasses, Jablonka, 48, has the look of a tech entrepreneur rather than an academic. He graduated from Paris’s prestigious *École normale supérieure* and eventually became a professor at *Université Sorbonne Paris Nord*, where his research topics have included gender violence, masculinity and the Holocaust.

In 2016 Jablonka won the prestigious *Prix Médicis* for his book *Laëtitia, ou La fin des hommes*, which recounted the real-life murder of an 18-year-old woman. The book forced him to confront the question of what a “just man” was: could masculinity and justice be reconciled? Soon after, in Paris’s bars and cafés, Jablonka began to write *Des hommes justes*, which became a surprise bestseller in France.

His work has now found a much wider audience: a lucid English translation by Nathan Bracher was published at the start of February, entitled *A History of Masculinity: From Patriarchy to Gender Justice*. Jablonka’s study of masculinity, by which he means the cultures, institutions and norms that shape ideas of the “male self”, begins in the Palaeolithic period. He traces how the unequal division of labour kept women in the home, having and raising children, while men were free to hoard resources and pursue power. Over millennia, a patriarchal system that benefited the majority of men was established, bolstered by a masculine culture of domination through which women were subjected to sexual violence and sexist stereotypes.

In the second part of the book, Jablonka explains why traditional concepts of masculinity are outdated and harmful. He argues that the value societies place on traditional masculinity serves to undermine and control not only women but also men whose masculinity is deemed illegitimate. Jablonka calls on men to rid masculinity of its “pathological tendencies”: he points to sexual violence, discrimination in the workplace and sexist stereotypes as perversions of masculinity that need to be excised. To combat this, he proposes a new form of gender ethics that starts with sharing household chores and listening to what women say.

Jablonka does not want to abandon masculinity completely, but rather make it compatible with gender equality. He argues that men are suffering under the traditional conception of masculinity and must redefine it to keep up with a changing society. While the 20th century brought feminist progress, it was also a period of masculine decay. Deindustrialisation stripped men of their role as breadwinners. In many societies, suicide rates for men are several times higher than for women, and since the 1970s, this disparity has widened in the US, Japan and several European countries.

Today, masculinity is often portrayed as being in a state of crisis, with some men seeking to push back against what they see as an attack on the traditional standards of manliness. Personalities such as the controversial psychologist Jordan Peterson have attracted huge support from young men looking for answers about how to live and behave.

“It seems to me that the lives of so many men are poor, are narrow,” Jablonka told me. “So many men are imprisoned in what I would call a gender prison, with the model of compulsory virility, the model of hyper-masculinity and what we should call a ‘male alienation’... This male alienation can be summed up with social facts, such as the shrinking of psychological life, or addictions, or car accidents, or suicides, and so on.” The result, as Jablonka argues in his book, is that some “men are worried about no longer being dominant”.

This fear breeds inertia. Jablonka believes that many men resist social change and act as their grandfathers did. “The truth is that many men still live in what I would call the ‘old world’... The risk is less of being an alpha male than of being an archaic man, shaped by patriarchy and completely overwhelmed by the march of society.” Jablonka thinks that men, stuck in a bygone era, no longer embody modernity. Instead, women are the archetypes of freedom and equality.

Jablonka’s solution is to task men with stripping masculinity of its misogyny. He argues that there are a “thousand ways of being a man”, and that enabling men to express their gender in multiple ways can help build a culture that supports gender equality. “If a man wants to drive a fast car or a motorcycle, or eat meat, or have a knife in his pocket to cut wood in the woods, well, I don’t care... A man can be the man he wants – provided that [his form of] masculinity doesn’t rhyme with misogyny or homophobia.”

He takes comfort in the example set by a younger generation more open to different expressions of gender and sexuality, which he thinks partly demonstrates a “distrust of patriarchy”. He cited the Korean band BTS as an example of young people challenging traditional conceptions of masculinity. “I can feel that it’s a real issue for young people and something they feel they must reflect upon. I can feel that there is something new in the air and it makes me more optimistic.”

Whether masculinity can become compatible with social progress is a personal question for Jablonka. He has three daughters, aged eight, 13 and 17. “For me, equality is no longer a theoretical word,” he said. “As a father of three daughters, equality became a daily struggle and a very concrete challenge. So, I wrote the book for men’s use, but also for the sake of my own daughters... I would like to change the world for the sake of my daughters, because I would like a safer and happier world for us, but also for them.”

Jablonka used this conviction to steel himself against some of the criticism his book received in France. On the right, “people would sneer at the book in a condescending tone and say I had undertaken a kind of feminist act of contrition”, Jablonka said, while on the left, “people were upset that a straight, white man dares to take part in the debate”.

But Jablonka rejects the notion that feminism is solely for women. “Equality of the sexes very much concerns men,” he writes in the book. “The problem is not of sex, but of gender; it is not about biology but rather about culture. As such, everyone can fight against it: feminism is a political choice.” ●

“Many men still live in the old world... shaped by patriarchy, and overwhelmed by the march of society”

ANDREW MARR



Politics

The Ukraine crisis shows “Global Britain” can’t afford to turn its back on Europe

And so it comes back, the real threat of European war. As a young political journalist in the 1980s I forever seemed to be sitting in conferences taking shorthand notes on the Soviet military. There were ponderous, self-important discussions in Königswinter and Oxfordshire about the missile gap and the pace of likely tank advance across the north German plain. The commentators then were fluent in ballistic technology and the glossy porn of ready-for-war. We thought we’d left all that behind. The market triumphalism of “the end of history” was matched with mockery of the rusting hulk of Soviet society. How we laughed.

But the giant wheel turns. Here we are again. One day, historians will ask whether Western democracies erred in effectively ignoring a defeated opponent, as did the victorious powers in 1918. But meanwhile, with perhaps 60 per cent of Russia’s army on Ukraine’s borders, Britain faces a humiliating moment of military truth – and a chance to move in new directions.

The humiliation isn’t just Britain’s, but Nato’s. Post-Soviet Russia, led by intelligence officers, chose to build an authoritarian military state rather than a consumerist mimicry of the West. And once you are a military system, that’s all you have to use.

So back to the missile porn. Vladimir Putin’s Russia and Xi Jinping’s China are probably both well ahead of the West in the crucial technology of the age: hypersonic missiles, travelling, and weaving, at between six and ten times the speed of sound.

Apparently successful tests on new weapons with names such as Avanguard,

Kinzhal, Zircon and Xingkong (yes, really) were paralleled by failures of the US equivalent late last year. So, perhaps only for a short time, Moscow and Beijing have weapons for which Washington has no answer; Russian military experts claim the new missiles, for instance, could easily destroy Britain’s two new aircraft carriers.

Beyond that, Russia has forged a highly effective military command and control system. Putin looks abroad at a US president disengaged from Europe; a Germany deeply compromised by its reliance on Russian gas (which accounts for 49 per cent of its foreign natural gas imports); a French president distracted by his re-election bid; and a London in utter political chaos, and wonders whether this isn’t the perfect moment to move.

Putin’s own writing makes clear it’s about much more than Ukraine: success for the Kremlin means pushing Nato out of the Baltic states and Poland, and returning most of the former Soviet bloc countries to Russia’s tutelage. Huge numbers of ordinary, peaceable, innocent people would be killed, maimed or forced to flee. No matter: Russia’s great humiliation, as Putin sees it, would be erased.

As I’m writing this, the Russian attack hasn’t begun. Pray God it’s a giant bluff. But it’s worth thinking, as clearly as we

Tory MPs will not remove their leader while shells are falling and cities burn

can, about where that war would take us.

The least important consequence would be that Boris Johnson would survive in the short term as prime minister. Far from Westminster, Tory impatience with him crackles murderously. But would MPs remove their leader while an actual war in another European country is happening? In times of international tension, for sure, quite possibly. But while shells are falling and cities burn? Nope.

Many on the left will argue that Britain’s relatively hard-line approach to Ukraine is cynically driven by Johnson’s survival plan. I disagree. This is such an egregious, unprovoked and full-scale challenge to our local part of the world order that no British leader could take a relaxed or appeasing view of it.

And anyway, bizarre as this sounds, the future of Alexander Boris de Pfeffel, and so forth, is the least of it. War in Europe, and the resulting sanctions, would paralyse economic recovery. Energy prices are already rising. We could see banks begin to totter, supply chains again grind to a halt, and millions of refugees pour west, including towards Britain. Military budgets, squeezed for decades, would be hurriedly swollen. Almost every policy assumption – about taxation and departmental spending, economic growth, and border policy – would have to be rethought.

Most immediately that includes the establishment’s attitude to billionaire Russians who have bought citizenship and influence here. New sanctions legislation recently tabled by UK ministers should help. But the question is willpower. As Thomas Mayne of Chatham House points out, not a single oligarch has been sanctioned yet.

At the heart of the problem are the “golden visas” that allow rich foreigners from all over the world to buy their way into Britain. Half of them, more than 6,000 investors, are being reviewed by the Home Office for possible national security risks. But more than three years after this investigation began, during Theresa May’s time as prime minister, not a word has been published. William Wallace, the Liberal Democrat peer leading the charge on this in the House of Lords, tells me the golden visa scheme should now be closed completely: “It’s demeaning. It makes us look like a poor offshore country that needs to sell its citizenship to survive.”

The government seems to disagree. Wallace wonders whether the influence of Russian money in Tory politics is part of the reason. Certainly, a crucial report by parliament’s Intelligence and Security Committee, published in summer 2020,

exposed the impact on politics of the London “laundromat” for dirty money.

Again, there has still not been a proper, public government response.

Tory MPs, too, are worried about the impact of Russian money on our public culture. In a Commons debate in January, David Davis discussed the brutal use of law or “lawfare” by Russian billionaires to intimidate writers and publishers. He cited legal action taken against the former *Financial Times* journalist Catherine Belton, the author of *Putin’s People*, and her publisher, HarperCollins.

Washington is increasingly worried about the Russian money and influence swirling around London. Washington is right. Whether Putin attacks Ukraine or pulls back, the problem can no longer be dodged.

Let’s look at an even bigger picture. One of the great unanswered questions after Brexit was always: where are our friends? For the right, the answer was Washington. But Donald Trump was too dark a maverick to be the ally of even enthusiastic neocons. Joe Biden, no great friend of Britain, may himself not be in power for very long. Australia? New Zealand? Fine, but too far away. India? But Narendra Modi? And so on...

There is a glaringly obvious answer, a near-at-hand country about the same size as the UK, facing very similar problems, and with whom Britain has close links. Whether or not the UK ever rejoins the EU (it seems unlikely), any London government should now be working very hard to get on better with France. The Germans are worryingly compromised on Russia. In these dark days, the French need us; and, frankly, we need them.

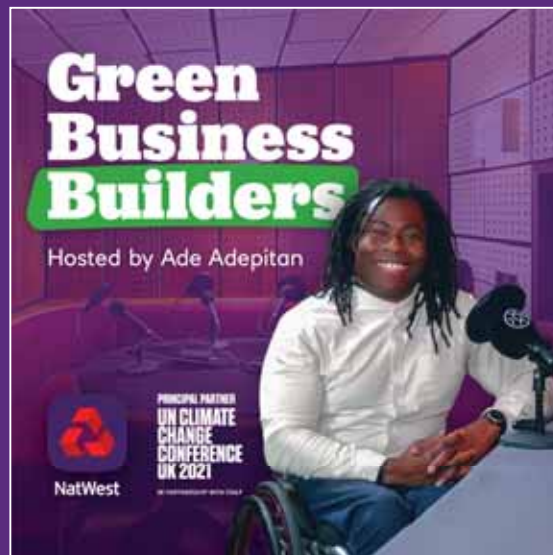
This is the worst possible time to be arguing about fish by-catches and the importation of sausage meat to Northern Ireland. On both sides, a deeper security and strategic alliance is essential. Beyond that, we must reinforce other old and natural European alliances, which include, high up the list, Poland and the Baltic states.

What this crisis demonstrates is that we can no longer afford to turn our backs on friendly, neighbouring states just because we’ve decided we don’t want continental federalism. “Global Britain” is a decent phrase. But we have always been “European Britain” too. We can’t stand up militarily to Putin’s Russia. There may be no good outcomes immediately ahead. But a London cleaned of dirty money, plus a more rational foreign policy, wouldn’t be a bad new beginning, would it? ●

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Letter of the week The Brexit burden



Andrew Marr, writing about possible successors to Boris Johnson ("Is Boris Johnson's luck finally running out?", 4 February), says of Jeremy Hunt: "[He] has done his best to make his peace with Brexit, arguing that if he knew then what he knows now, he would have voted to leave."

That seems an extreme form of peace-making, especially if you believe that not all our woes are due to the pandemic. The queues of lorries in Kent are seldom reported outside that county but they will inevitably lead to a hike in prices, exacerbating the cost-of-living crisis. Brexit has created a skills shortage and hence job vacancies. But that is offset by the economic damage and lost livelihoods among smaller enterprises strangled by Brexit-generated red tape. Opportunities to work and study in the EU and for performing artists to tour have been cut off. All that, and the risk to the hard-won peace in Northern Ireland.

I, for one, cannot respect any politician who panders to those who still claim that this monumental act of national self-harm was a good thing.

Vera Lustig, Walton-on-Thames, Surrey

Purple pros and cons

It is a great boon that Andrew Marr has joined the *NS* but can we do away with the florid language? One paragraph alone ("Is Boris Johnson's luck finally running out?", 4 February) is full of adjectives: "choked", "misty", "vivid" and "strange". Great political commentator Marr may be, but poet he is not.

Dan Rovira, English teacher, via email

The matter of mind

After 50 years working in psychiatry and community mental health, there is hardly a word I disagree with in Sophie McBain's overview of psychiatric diagnosis ("The end of mental illness", 11 February). I would

only add that the fixation on the medical model is not simply the product of the diagnostic establishment. The law, the social security systems and the media are also now perpetuating this exhausted account. The diagnostic mission creep



that McBain's article depicts was driven not by medical overreach but by the US health insurance system, which demands a diagnosis before it will fund treatment.

Robin Johnson, Falmouth, Cornwall

In the history of psychiatry the consensus on cause has often swung between biological and social. Descartes' mind-body dualism had a tragic effect on Western medicine. The impact of physical illness on the mental state, and vice versa, is often not considered. In many other systems, such as Ayurveda, there is a recognised relationship between the mind and body. As Leon Eisenberg outlined nearly 50 years ago, disease concerns pathology while its impact on social functioning is what should be called illness. Patients are interested in illnesses; clinicians in diseases. There is anecdotal evidence that many patients can live with their symptoms as long as they have housing, employment and economic independence and are able to form relationships. Diagnoses are important for several reasons, but patients often do not fit into neat diagnostic categories.

Dinesh Bhugra CBE, Emeritus Professor of mental health and cultural diversity, King's College London

Against eugenics

John Gray ("A better kind of being?", 11 February) parades his preferences in his take on eugenics and 20th-century British intellectuals: "While Christians were divided on eugenics, progressive thinkers were at one in supporting it." Not so. Lancelot Hogben, scientific humanist, *NS* contributor and one of the three foremost biologists of the interwar period, led the moral and technical excoriating of eugenics.

Professor Callum G Brown, Doune, Stirlingshire

Career opportunity

I was very taken with Stephen Bush's account of showing children around parliament (*Bursting the Bubble*, 4 February). In fact, I wonder if Mr Bush might consider extending his services to a different audience? As an OAP, I could easily cope with tales of gore and violence. I would promise to behave, and would enjoy the chocolate!

Jane England, via email

Write to letters@newstatesman.co.uk
We reserve the right to edit letters

A few months ago I received a text from a senior and prominent back-bench Conservative MP. The text asked me to sign a legislative amendment that was about to be tabled. I ignored it, assuming it had been sent by mistake. The MP then sent a follow-up text. "Not sure this is for me," I responded – again I assumed that this was a generic text being sent to an out-of-date list. But then came another message as the MP persevered.

This was now becoming somewhat awkward. "Don't you have to be an MP to sign an amendment?" I asked, trying to be tactful. "Yes, I had forgotten," they replied. "Sorry. Keep thinking you are here..."

I am not going to name the MP other than to say that it was not Graham Brady, chair of the 1922 Committee of Tory back-bench MPs. Had it been, I might have kept quiet and waited for the chance to send a note requesting a vote of no-confidence in Boris Johnson's leadership. I am still tempted to chance my arm.

Those who want Johnson removed fall into two camps on timing. There are those who want to go early, who believe that the evidence of his unfitness for office is clear; that his continuance as leader is damaging the reputation of the Conservative Party and his ministerial colleagues, and is bad for the country. Some fear that the best opportunity has been missed now that parliament is in recess: the Prime Minister will get some breathing space and by the time the Commons returns other matters, such as Ukraine, may have caused the public's attention to move on.

The alternative view is that the better chance of defeating Johnson would be after the police investigation of lockdown parties is complete or the Conservatives suffer a thrashing in this May's local elections. One Johnson sceptic told me that even a narrow defeat for the Prime Minister in a confidence vote would be a worry because a section of the party would never be reconciled to his removal in these circumstances, causing lasting ill-will and division. It was even suggested that Johnson might stay in parliament and seek a return to the leadership. A no-confidence vote, consequently, might have to wait until it was clear the result would be emphatic.

Clearly, there are fewer than 54 – the number who must submit letters to Brady to cause a leadership vote – who want to move early as no vote has yet been called. Those who want him gone but are waiting for the mood to change in the parliamentary party almost certainly constitute a much larger number but nobody can tell for certain. So Johnson staggers on.

The consequences are painful. Ministers are routinely humiliated when they put themselves up for interview. This can often be an occupational hazard for ministers (as I recall only too well), but the sheer number of indefensible positions that have to be defended at any one time (parties, Johnson's Jimmy Savile slur against Keir Starmer, and crime statistics are the current topics) must make all but the most brazen despair.

Most ministers are sufficiently anonymous to be expendable (again,

as I recall only too well), but for some reputational damage also means damage to the Conservative Party's prospects. Rishi Sunak should be a major asset at the next election (whether as prime minister or chancellor) but is forced into either loyally defending Johnson, which tarnishes his reputation for integrity and decency, or into putting some distance between himself and his Downing Street neighbour, in which case he is accused of disloyalty. His popularity is diminished either way.

Johnson's weakness also results in decisions being tactical not strategic – even more so than normal. The new appointments to No 10 and the ministerial reshuffle were designed to please the Conservative backbenchers who can keep the Prime Minister in office. The European Research Group will welcome Jacob Rees-Mogg being given the task of trying to find some Brexit opportunities but it is hard to see how this will end well. MPs will initially appreciate having people they know at the heart of No 10 with Steve Barclay and Andrew Griffith as chief of staff and policy director respectively, but this will probably result in confusion, blurred lines of accountability and conflicts of interest. This is not a criticism of Barclay or Griffith, but it is striking how those who have done the job of chief of staff, in particular, believe that this arrangement will not work.

Then there is policy. Ensuring that Johnson survives even if 54 letters go in (which will surely happen if the Prime Minister gets a fixed penalty notice for lockdown breaches) will be the priority. This will mean appeasing the dominant right of the parliamentary party. The Prime Minister has so far resisted calls for a change of approach on tax but he has moved quickly to drop Covid restrictions, and the risk of him taking a more belligerent line on the Northern Ireland protocol is growing.

Meanwhile, the government's popularity takes a hammering as the benefit of the doubt is lost. On any chosen issue, the public assumes that the government is in the wrong, even when it appears to have handled matters well, such as with Ukraine. The longer this unpopularity lasts, the harder it will be to reverse.

Every week that goes by with Johnson still in office deepens the problems for the government and the Conservative Party. Tory MPs have a reputation for ruthlessly disposing of inadequate leaders, but their reluctance to do so now will come at a heavy price. ●

DAVID GAUKE



Westminster Why are Conservative MPs so reluctant to dispose of Boris Johnson?

JEREMY CLIFFE



World View

In the face of Russian aggression, the West can and must rediscover its strength

In a 1967 experiment the psychologists Martin Seligman and Steven Maier subjected a number of unfortunate dogs to electric shocks. One group was given the opportunity to escape and did so, while a second group remained captive. When, however, a chance to escape was then offered to the latter group, they did not take it. They had come to accept the shocks. The psychologists termed this “learned helplessness”, an idea that became influential in studies of self-fulfilling stress, apathy and fatalism in humans.

It can also be applied to entire societies. That, at least, is the argument of the 2022 Munich Security Report, which was published on 14 February. The report appears annually ahead of the Munich Security Conference – the top gabfest of transatlantic foreign policy and defence elites – and functions as a barometer of the West’s geopolitical sense of itself. This year’s report argues that: “Just like people can suffer from ‘learned helplessness’... societies, too, may come to believe that they are unable to get a grip on the challenges they are facing.” It includes an international poll showing pluralities of respondents in agreement that “my country has no control over global events”, a sentiment particularly prevalent in democratic Western states.

The estimated 130,000 Russian troops now concentrated on the borders of Ukraine make for an ominously apt backdrop. At the time of writing, Western governments are warning of an imminent invasion involving enormous air strikes, an attack on Kyiv and a bid to topple Ukraine’s government. All eyes are on Vladimir Putin who, as a *Financial Times* headline puts it, “leaves the West guessing”. Who is advising

Putin? How reckless is he prepared to be? What is his vision of Russia’s history and present place in the world?

The frenetic speculation flatters the inscrutable Russian president, imbuing him with the aura of an agenda-setter, a barrel-chested man of the moment, a spirit of the age, a “synthesis of the inhuman and the superhuman”, as Friedrich Nietzsche wrote of Napoleon in 1887. The West is relegated to a position of passivity and helplessness as its leaders file in succession to Putin’s Kremlin court to perch at the end of that exaggeratedly long marble table and try to divine his plans.

Enough. Whatever happens next, and especially if Putin escalates matters in Ukraine, a reality check about the man, his regime and the West itself is long overdue. For Russia’s president is no ingenious 3D chess player, nor is he ultimately in a position of strength, and to act as if he is gives him far too much credit.

Keep hold of the following facts. Russia’s GDP is smaller than Italy’s and has stagnated for most of the past decade. Its military budget amounts to barely 7 per cent of Nato’s combined defence spending. Real disposable incomes in Russia were 11 per cent lower in 2020 than in 2013 and wealthy Russians, including many around Putin, prefer to keep their families and often

Vladimir Putin is a dangerous and delusional mediocrity, not a grand strategist

ill-gotten money in the West. The peoples of Russia’s “near abroad” are increasingly alienated, thanks in no small part to the Kremlin’s actions and its unattractive, brittle political-economic model.

None of which is to say that Russia cannot wreak appalling devastation on Ukraine. Yet it takes no great brilliance to disrupt, destroy and alienate. Putin’s role on the world stage has been defined primarily by ineptitude. His record on Ukraine over the years, for example, has led a country once well-disposed to Russia to shift decisively towards social, political and economic Europeanisation. Any invasion now is effectively an admission of that failure. Putin is indeed to be feared – but as a dangerously delusional mediocrity, not a grand strategist.

If the West cannot stand up to Putin, it should not be in the business of geopolitics at all. Yes, it has suffered setbacks and learned the folly of its naive 1990s optimism. Yes, it was humiliated by the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan last year. Yet it is vastly wealthier and more powerful than Russia and its leaders govern with the free democratic consent of their peoples. As the Ukrainian author Nataliya Gumenyuk put it to me in Kyiv in January: “The West often speaks as if it were weak, or shy of its strength. It has more leverage and is stronger than it thinks.” It must “unlearn” its helplessness, in other words.

That means a maximalist and united Western response to any Russian invasion of Ukraine, targeted not at the Russian people but at Putin’s regime. Boot out Kremlin kleptocrats from the West; penalise the lobbyists, bankers and lawyers who abet them; target their banks with crippling sanctions; strip the shell companies they use for money laundering of their rights. Revise the 1997 Nato-Russia Founding Act to deploy intermediate-range missile systems in Nato’s eastern states and position new conventional forces there. Increase support to the Russian opposition, Kremlin-sceptic activists and politicians in other post-Soviet states. Arm and support a Ukrainian resistance. Britain, a destination of choice for many around Putin, can and must play a central role: the road to an engaged, values-led, responsible post-Brexit UK role starts in Mayfair.

If the West enacts these measures it may be surprised at the strength it can still wield. So, too, may others around the world, including Beijing, which would interpret reactions to any invasion of Ukraine as a guide to the price it would pay for seizing Taiwan. Learned helplessness can indeed be self-fulfilling. But so, too, can unlearning it. ●

A moment's peace in the capital

The world anxiously awaits Putin's next move, but the mood in Kyiv remains calm

Bruno Maçães

The West's doom-calls bounce off a city practised in composure during crisis

We talk a lot about beginnings, but they are usually projects, plans, love affairs, or summer holidays. How does a war begin? How does an announced war actually begin, especially one that intelligence sources are already predicting will be a horrific campaign, with tens of thousands of deaths and days of carpet bombing from the air? I kept asking that

question to everyone I met in Kyiv in recent days. Would the lights go off? Undoubtedly, but, as an experienced foreign correspondent in the Ukrainian capital told me, it makes more sense to start a war in the middle of the night.

Will there be sirens the moment the Russian planes cross the border? Will the church bells ring? We agree it is much more likely we will be awakened by the sound of bombs raining on Kyiv, including the government buildings surrounding my hotel. "Remember there are 400 missiles pointed at Kyiv, including Kalibr cruise missiles," one security officer reminded me. "One missile, one building."

Living like this may soon become impossible. The mood is not of danger or fear, but imminence. Ukrainians have been told to wait, but how can a people be expected to live in permanent abeyance for a future event over which they have no control, which can arrive at any moment, and which makes normal life

increasingly impossible? It was interesting that in early February the White House announced it would no longer speak of the Russian invasion as "imminent" since there is no direct translation in Ukrainian. This is a dubious conclusion about Ukrainian, and yet true at some level. Human beings cannot comprehend or control the imminent.

Kyiv these days is not a city of spies but a city of journalists. I cannot have a coffee with anyone without two or three journalists jumping out of a dark corner and announcing: "I heard your conversation." Reporters from all over the world have converged on the hipster cafés of Kyiv. You can spot them rehearsing live broadcasts in pizzerias and parks, occupying the penthouse floors in every major hotel, and then arguing about geopolitics until the early hours in bars once favoured by supermodels and oligarchs. The large groups of journalists are the only indication that city



Standing tall: the Motherland Monument in Kyiv, Ukraine

life is not quite normal, which is ironic since they have come looking for signs of just that.

The supermarkets are full. There has been no stockpiling, although some people have carried water and wood to their second homes in the countryside. The price for a gas canister has gone up from 900 to 1,600 hryvnias, about £40.

Everything is done with measure and discretion. I am told of a few wealthy families who decided to leave Kyiv. Instead of large suitcases, they carried a few small bags. Patriotism is a serious duty in Ukraine. The main preparations are to fight, not to flee. In the north-eastern city of Kharkiv, near the Russian border, so many guns have been sold they have now run out. The authorities in Kyiv have put out a map of bomb shelters, but many residents refuse to consult it.

A week after new warnings of an imminent attack, the two city airports continue to op-

erate without any disruptions. You can even buy tickets, although prices have gone up. The shopping centres are full, the restaurants as memorable as during my previous visits, and on Valentine's Day, I attended a concert by the soprano Olga Chubareva with a programme of romantic arias and other love songs. During the performance, I stole glances at my phone and discovered the Americans are now certain the invasion will happen in less than two days. No one else in the concert hall seemed to care about the news. On 15 February we woke up to reports that Canada's prime minister, Justin Trudeau, had introduced the Canadian equivalent of martial law in response to blockades and protests over Covid measures. In Ukraine, with one of the largest armies in the world poised to attack the capital, there is no increased police presence or any restriction on civil freedoms.

Ukrainians feel the pressure, but they have learnt over centuries of hardship and foreign occupation to respond with grace. Daily life proceeds unruffled, but conversations do eventually turn to the threat of the great and apparently inexorable disaster announced by the US. I spent a long time discussing geopolitics and philosophy with a Ukrainian author. Not once did he express the slightest concern about a Russian invasion, which he thought implausible. At times he seemed amused by my recapitulation of all the disturbing signs arriving from the border, which now include artillery movements to attack position. But as we walked slowly down Andriivskyi Descent, the pretty street connecting downtown Kyiv to Podil, his mood changed. He confessed he had considered sending his daughters to live with a relative abroad and added that watching one of ▶

Cover Story

◀ them play the piano that afternoon, he could not stop himself from wondering if she would be able to play a week later.

What a contrast. On one side, thousands of nameless soldiers sent marching in the frozen mud by one man who would never look them in the face. On the other, a young girl playing piano. It is not human life or human comfort or even human rights that war aims to exterminate. It is beauty that those troops hate the most.

There is defiance too. "If the Russians come," a member of the Verkhovna Rada, Ukraine's parliament, told me, "they will find their private hell here." And dissatisfaction with the West has grown in recent weeks. What the Americans have created with their repeated warnings is a sense of fatalism that cannot but remind Ukrainians of their historical ghosts. Some even suggest the US



must have reached some kind of deal with Russia. Why else would it be closing its embassy, scaring foreign investors and airlines, or waving the possibility of a poisoned peace deal involving impossible concessions? Why, if the war is inevitable, have sanctions against Russia not been announced? Why, if war is not inevitable, has it been presented as such? Why has Russia escaped sanctions while the Ukrainian economy is actively punished? The panic among foreigners has led to capital flight and the urgent need to use public funds to insure airlines flying in Ukrainian airspace. Does the US want to drag Russia into a quagmire in Ukraine? Or does it want Russia's help against China?

I have been coming to Kyiv almost every year since 2014, when the ousting of President Yanukovich led to two Russian invasions in Crimea and Donbas. And every year the city looks different and more aware of itself. The political turmoil and the embrace of a European future accelerated its development. On the surface, an explosion of new galleries, cafés and international restaurants have transformed Kyiv into one of the most vibrant European capitals. More deeply, this is a city embedded in history and politics. Monuments to its famous three revolutions – in 1991, 2004 and 2013-14 – cover the city landscape. Long ago Paris may have evoked the same feelings and associations. Today it is Kyiv that best preserves the European legacy of revolution, the collective effort to rise above circumstances and build a new future.

Enter restaurants such as Veterano or Ostana Barricada and what you find are living museums of recent Ukrainian history. In Veterano the cook baking your pizza is probably a veteran of the war in eastern Ukraine. In Ostana Barricada, the walls are covered with precious relics from the three popular uprisings. The hipster waiters even gave me a tour of the small museum. On one wall hang the gloves once worn by the bell-ringer Ivan Sydor. In the early hours of 11 December 2013, while the Berkut special forces started to storm Maidan, the young theology student kept ringing the bells at St Michael's cathedral, urging Kyiv to wake up and stand for the dream of a European Ukraine. The last time the bell was sounded as a warning was 800 years ago during the occupation of Kyiv by Batu Khan, the Mongol ruler, founder of the Golden Horde.

How does a war begin? If one returns to my initial question, a new answer emerges. For the foreign visitor, it will be a senseless explosion in the darkness of night. For the inhabitants of Kyiv, it is a link in a long historical chain, one more chapter in the national story. There is comfort in history, the knowledge that many generations of Ukrainians have gone through the same hardship before, and others will follow in future. Ukraine, however, is immortal.

Andrey Kurkov

While oligarchs flee, my friends and I head out for a long Sunday lunch

As yet another tank army moves out of the Russian city of Voronezh towards the Ukrainian border, and the prospect of war looms larger, life in Kyiv is strange. The departure of American diplomats from Ukraine and the relocation of the US embassy from the capital to the city of Lviv came just weeks after an announcement that the American University in Kyiv would soon open its doors. This has created a pleasant kind of dissonance.

I already envy the future students. The university is located in the building of the former port on the bank of the Dnieper, the country's major river. There is a long strip of pleasant embankment nearby, with berths for pleasure boats, as well as many cafés and restaurants, and Podil, one of Kyiv's most ancient districts. The university was opened jointly with the University of Arizona. Vernon Smith, a Nobel Prize-winning economist, along with other eminent academics, will soon lecture there. Classes are due to start on 1 March.

At the other end of Kyiv, on its southern outskirts, the construction of the Presidential University has begun. Why build another university using public funds at this time? The presidential office has offered vague explanations that none of the existing universities meet contemporary standards and it is impossible to modernise them. Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelensky, has promised that the best of the best will teach at the new institution.

It immediately occurred to me that those professors at the American University might have to work part-time at the Presidential University. Getting there every day will not be easy. The distance between the two universities is nearly 20 kilometres. There are traffic jams in Kyiv from morning to evening. And, to slow things down further, there are almost always protests of one sort or another going on.

At the moment it is small-business owners holding regular demonstrations in front of parliament. They are opposed to a new law making the use of cash registers mandatory; until recently, small businesses were able to



The path of most resistance: Ukrainians protest against Russian aggression, 12 February

sell goods and services without controls, using mostly cash. But the government needs money. Even now, during the crisis with Russia, roads are still being built and repaired throughout Ukraine. And dotted along these roads across the country, advertising billboards can be spotted bearing the message: “Major construction. A President Zelensky Project.”

These billboards, too, cause protests. Activists launched an official petition to the presidential office demanding that the signs mention that these projects are taxpayer-funded. Zelensky clearly did not like this idea; the petition has been ignored.

I have a small house in a village about 16 kilometres from the main highway heading west out of Kyiv. The road was last renovated ahead of Euro 2012. It is now once again full of holes. But the motorway towards Russia is in excellent condition. I recently had to drive on it to the village of Kozelshchyna, in the Poltava region. The village is about a five-hour drive from Kyiv, and I was giving a lecture in the local library titled “The Role and Significance of the Local and National Elites”. I was very curious to find out what people in that part of Ukraine think about the subject, and what it is like to live both so far from the capital, and so much closer to the Russian border.

The discussion that followed my talk went on for about an hour. All those present were interested in the question of how to help members of the local elite become members

of the national elite. That is: how can we replace the “new faces” who came to power together with Zelensky with even newer faces? Many people in Ukraine are disappointed by Zelensky’s unfulfilled promises to bring an end to corruption and poverty. The politicians Zelensky brought with him were unable to enact positive change.

After the meeting in the library, I was given a tour of the village. The only historical attraction in Kozelshchyna is a convent with a huge church, in which a large portrait of Tsar Nicholas II hangs in a conspicuous place. In Russia, Tsar Nicholas was canonised as a saint. The portrait indicates that both the convent and the church belong to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate. In other words, they are affiliated to the Russian Orthodox Church.

The position of the Moscow Patriarchate in Ukraine is still very strong. In its churches, worshippers regularly say prayers for the health of Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church, an associate of Vladimir Putin and one of the leaders of the Russkiy Mir Foundation, a so-called humanitarian project whose goal is to unite all Russian speakers in the world around Moscow. There are no other churches in this village.

On Sunday 13 February, while oligarchs and their business partners were rolling out their private jets or chartering planes to leave the country, Ukrainians were debating who should represent the country at this year’s Eurovision song contest. After a tough

competition, the singer and rapper Alina Pash, from Transcarpathia in the west of Ukraine, was chosen. This decision has provoked a storm of protest. Pash visits Moscow and has allegedly performed in the annexed Crimea, which for many is clear proof of her compromised patriotism and pro-Russian views.

While the oligarchs were flying abroad, my friends and I were looking for a place to have Sunday lunch. Popular restaurants such as Chinese Hello and Pop-up Breakfast Café on Franko Street in the old city centre were packed with customers. After half an hour of searching, we finally found a free table at the Mafia chain restaurant. It was surprisingly quiet. Maybe the customers were put off by the coexistence of pizza and Japanese dishes on the menu. While we were having lunch, the restaurant gradually filled with couples – lovers apparently celebrating Valentine’s Day in advance.

Outwardly, there is no evidence of panic in Kyiv. The French embassy has advised nationals who have chosen to stay in Ukraine to stockpile drinking water. When I heard this, I also decided to buy a few five-litre bottles.

On 14 February I learned that work had begun on a film based on my novel, *Grey Bees*, about life in the grey zone of the Donbas region. The film is being shot near Severodonetsk, not far from the Russian border and only 16 kilometres from the front line.

I found out about this by accident when a director friend of mine spotted me in a café and came up to tell me that a special effects specialist he knew was working on the pyrotechnics for my film. I find the idea of pyrotechnics at this time and so close to the Russia-Ukraine border bizarre. I wrote an email to the producer asking her to send photos. In fact, I would really love to attend the shoot myself, but I am afraid that my wife is unlikely to approve of such a trip. Especially now, when it may be necessary to make important decisions very quickly.

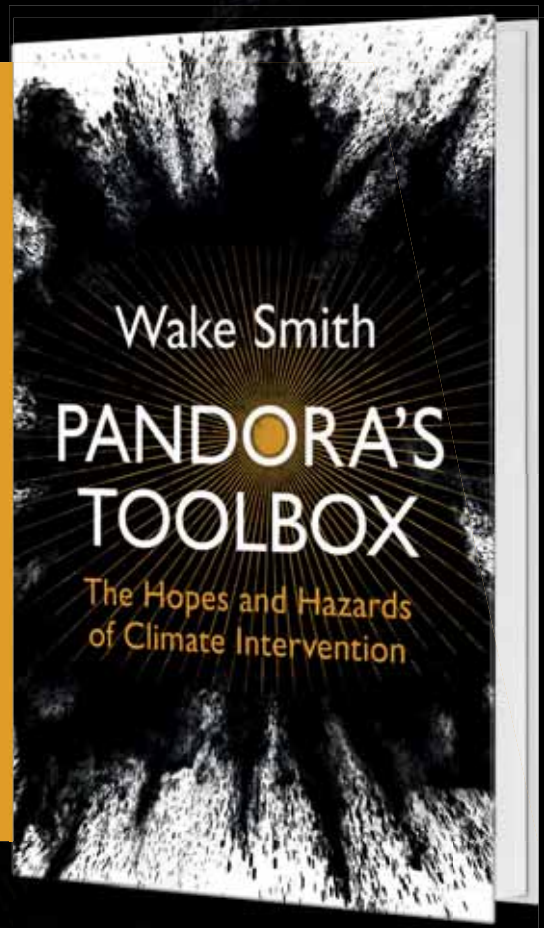
That same day I also learned that some of our members of parliament, including several from Zelensky’s party, have chosen to leave Ukraine. I assume the country will manage without them. Most Ukrainians are staying – some because they see no real threat, others because they see the threat and are preparing to defend the country.

As for me, I keep checking the airport website to see if my flight to Vilnius next week is still available. I am invited to the book fair there, and will spend three days in the city. Then I will come back to Kyiv. ●

Andrey Kurkov is a Ukrainian novelist and journalist who lives in Kyiv

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THE REPORT

The Silencing China, the Uyghurs and a historic culture under existential threat



The Silencing: the subjugation of Xinjiang

Over the past five years, at least one million Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities have been imprisoned in the Xinjiang region. The Chinese say they are combating separatism, religious extremism and international terrorism. Western governments call it genocide

By Katie Stallard

The opening ceremony of the Beijing Winter Olympics on 4 February ended with a scene that was at once jarring and banal. Dinigeer Yilamujiang, a young Uyghur cross-country skier from Xinjiang, stood in the stadium alongside Zhao Jiawen, a member of the country's Han ethnic majority. Smiling and waving in their red and white Team China uniforms, they lifted a single gleaming torch between them and lit the Olympic flame. It was a simple, powerful gesture that was clearly designed to send the message: what genocide?

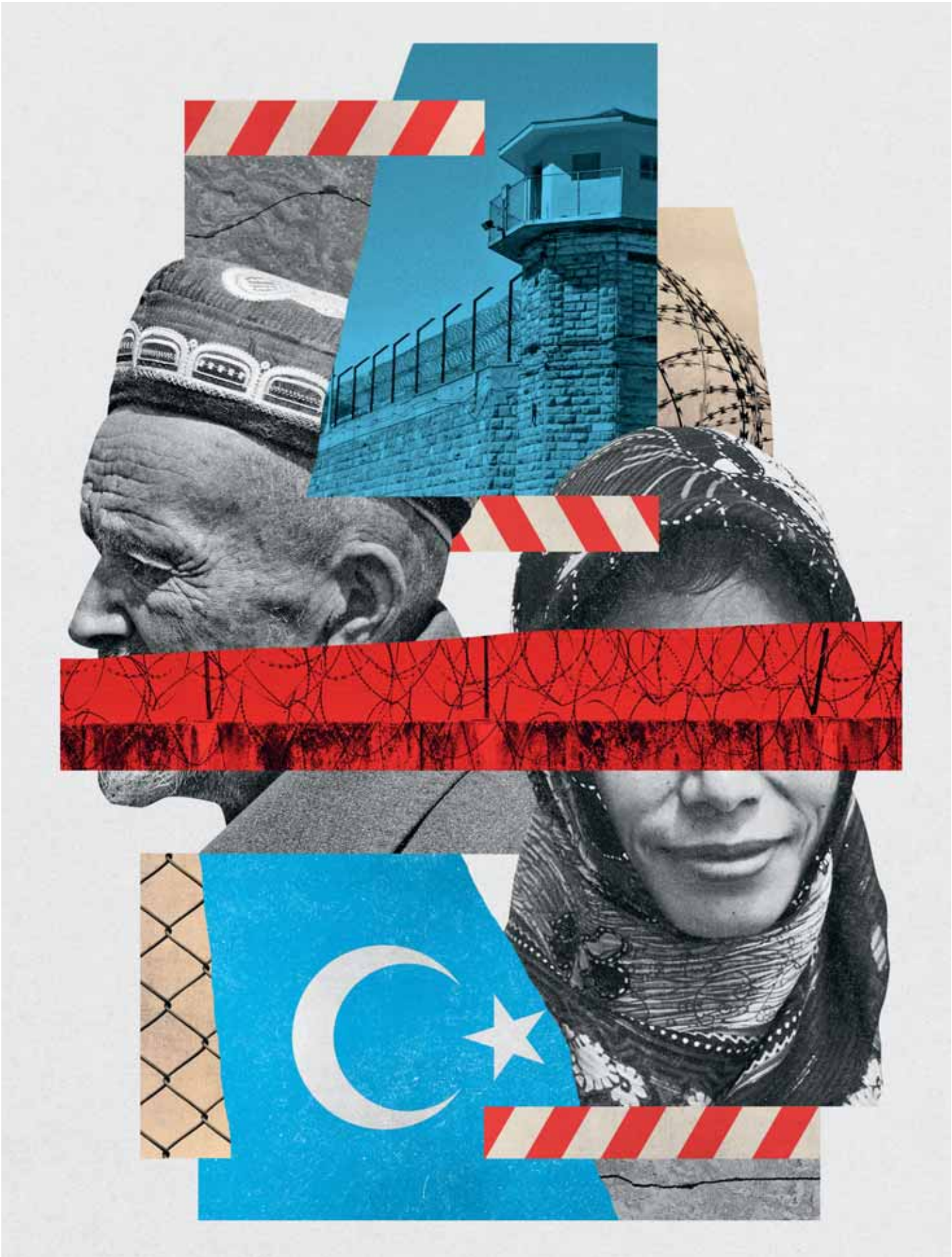
Over the past five years, the Chinese authorities have imprisoned at least one million Uyghurs and people from other ethnic minorities in the north-western region of Xinjiang. The network of internment camps and detention centres there is so vast, researchers have been able to map it on satellite images from space. Some of those who escaped have described systematic torture, forced sterilisation and sexual abuse. It is the largest detention of a religious or ethnic group since the Second World War's concentration camps.

We don't know what Yilamujiang thinks about what is happening in Xinjiang because she wasn't asked. Chinese state media outlets carried a few cursory comments from the athlete about how proud she was to be part of the ceremony. But after finishing her race near the back of the pack the next morning, she failed to appear in the media zone, where international journalists would have had the chance to ask her questions.

Elise Anderson of the Uyghur Human Rights Project, a US-based non-profit organisation, denounced the ceremony as a "political stunt meant to deflect international criticism, as though parading a Uyghur athlete around somehow disproves the party state's well-documented atrocity crimes". The historian Jeffrey Wasserstrom told me it reminded him of the dystopia in *The Hunger Games*, "in which powerful people in a glittering capital... use competitors from harshly repressed places for political [gain]".

The Uyghurs are a mostly Muslim Turkic minority who trace their history and their ancestral homeland in the region back more than 1,000 years. For much of that time they lived autonomously, until the territory was brought under the control of the Qing empire, and later the People's Republic of China (PRC). In terms of culture and language, as Rhian Thum and Musapir (a Uyghur scholar writing under a pen name) explain on page 34, the Uyghurs are closer to Central Asia than they are to the Han majority in China.

That the Qing called the territory Xinjiang ("New Frontier") – a name rejected by many Uyghurs – after it was incorporated as a province in 1884 tells you something about the space it occupied in the imaginations of the ►



ANDREI COJOCARU

The Silencing

◀ imperial rulers then, and now by the current leadership in Beijing. For the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Xinjiang is a frontier region that must be kept under strong central control lest it become a channel for outside influences to threaten the modern Chinese state, or worse, slips from its grasp altogether.

In part, this attitude is shaped by geopolitics. Xinjiang sits more than 2,000 miles west of Beijing and borders eight countries including Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan. Together with Tibet, the region directly to the south (both technically Autonomous Regions within China, although without real autonomy), the two territories comprise almost a third of China's land mass. Xinjiang's narrow stretch of border with Afghanistan, which includes the Wakhan Corridor, is of particular concern. While Chinese officials publicly gloated over the United States' chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan last year, Beijing fears the dangers a failed state on its border might bring.

Fighters from the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement, whose stated goal is to establish an independent Uyghur state in Xinjiang, are known to operate in Afghanistan, where they have links with other extremist groups. As John Simpson writes on page 30, as many as 5,000 Uyghurs are thought to have joined Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria, making them one of the largest groups of foreign fighters there. When IS-Khorasan carried out a suicide bombing at a mosque in the Afghan city of Kunduz last October, the group claimed the bomber was Uyghur and that the attack targeted the Taliban's growing ties with Beijing. There have also been attacks by Uyghur groups in China itself. In October 2013 a Uyghur family drove a car into a crowd of tourists in Tiananmen Square, killing two and injuring 38 more. Black-clad militants armed with knives and machetes murdered 29 people at a train station in Kunming, southern China, in March 2014, in an attack that state media called "China's 9/11". Two months later, at least 31 people were killed in a suicide bombing at a market in Ürümqi, Xinjiang's regional capital.

Chinese officials were quick to adopt the language of the global war on terror to frame their approach to Xinjiang. In October 2001, one month after the 11 September attacks on the US, Beijing rebranded its concerns about Uyghur separatists as an "international 'terrorist threat' linked to al-Qaeda", writes the



Brought into line: detainees in a re-education camp in Xinjiang listen to a talk on "de-radicalisation", 2017

scholar Sean Roberts in *The War on the Uyghurs* (2020). The government doubled down on a campaign to eradicate what it called the "three evils" of separatism, religious extremism and international terrorism, which rendered calls for Uyghur self-determination synonymous with the threat from Islamist extremists. It was a convenient – and more politically palatable – way of talking about the other factor driving the CCP's policies in the region: lingering suspicion of its inhabitants.

As far back as the founding of the PRC in 1949, Mao Zedong sent a delegation to Moscow to discuss his concerns about Xinjiang with Joseph Stalin. The Soviet leader agreed with Mao that the territory, which had briefly functioned as a de facto independent state, should be occupied and brought under Beijing's control in case rival powers attempted to "activate the Muslims" and sow dissent. Stalin noted the "large deposits of oil and cotton in Xinjiang" and advised sending Chinese settlers to develop "this huge and rich region" and strengthen China's border protection.

Between 10 and 20 per cent of Xinjiang's adults have been detained

Successive Chinese rulers have viewed the region in similar terms – as a strategic location that is vital to national security, yet whose inhabitants cannot be fully trusted. There have been periods of greater and lesser repression over the decades, but the rise to power of Xi Jinping in 2012 marked the start of a new and more aggressive chapter in the central government's approach. After the attack on the train station in Kunming in 2014, Xi toured Xinjiang and called for the authorities to deliver a "crushing blow". The stability of the whole country was at stake, he warned, calling for a "people's war" to bring the region under control.

In the years since, the authorities have implemented a devastating system of collective punishment that targets the Muslim population of Xinjiang. Under Xi, attending a mosque or growing a beard is considered suspect. More than one million government workers have been sent to the region to identify "untrustworthy" Muslims, writes Darren Byler in *In the Camps* (2021). Hundreds of internment camps and a suffocating network of surveillance technology has been built. By some estimates, between 10 and 20 per cent of Xinjiang's adult population has been detained.

In 2018, drone footage showed hundreds of men kneeling on the ground, waiting to be loaded on to trains. Their heads were shaved. They were shackled and blindfolded. Confronted with the footage in a television studio by Andrew Marr, China's ambassador to London, Liu Xiaoming, replied that "prisoner transfers" happened in every country. "Uyghur



Strategic significance: 1) Mongolia, 2) Russia, 3) Kazakhstan, 4) Kyrgyzstan, 5) Tajikistan, 6) Afghanistan, 7) Pakistan, 8) India

people enjoy a peaceful, harmonious coexistence with other ethnic groups,” he said.

As the detentions gathered pace in 2019, local officials in the Xinjiang city of Turpan were issued with a script for responding to the most frequently asked questions from distraught relatives, such as: “Where are my family members?” The answer they were supposed to give, according to leaked documents, was that they were in a government “training school” and there was “nothing to worry about”. Tuition at the school was free, the script explained, “and so are food and living costs, and the standards are quite high”.

But if the relative pressed further and asked why the person couldn’t just come home, the conversation would take a sinister, Orwellian tone. “It seems that you’re still misunderstanding how concentrated education is run,” the prescribed answer said. The person had been “infected by unhealthy thinking” and until they were cured of this “virus” and their thoughts “thoroughly transformed”, they couldn’t be allowed to leave and risk infecting others.

As Uyghur adults disappeared into the camps, human rights groups documented cases of children being sent to state orphanages even when there were relatives prepared to take them in. In these institutions they were taught in Mandarin and separated from their Uyghur roots. Under what is known as the “Becoming Family” campaign, Han officials stay overnight with Uyghur families, including in homes where the male relatives have been detained, leaving women and girls vulnerable to abuse. Strict birth control policies have

also been implemented. There are reports of women being forcibly fitted with intrauterine devices, designed to be removable through surgery, and sterilised without their consent.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, whose mission is to do for others today what was not done for the Jews of Europe, said in November 2021 that it was “gravely concerned” and urged swift, coordinated action, warning that the “future of a people may depend on [it]”. The US State Department and the UK and Canadian parliaments have condemned the authorities’ “industrial-scale abuses” in Xinjiang, declaring it a genocide.

The appearance of a single Uyghur athlete at the Winter Olympics should reassure no one. At best, the torch-lighting ceremony showed the government cared enough about Western criticism to attempt to perpetuate the fiction that it believes in ethnic unity. At worst, it was a vision of the future China has designated for the Uyghurs: smiling, compliant and silent. That is why the voices in the pages that follow are so important. The Uyghurs are more than passive victims. These essays centre Uyghur culture, history and literature, culminating with three specially commissioned poems by the exiled Uyghur writer Fatimah Abdulghafar Seyyah on page 48. “Promise to come to me alive,” Seyyah writes, as she renders the experience of loss and longing for her family and her homeland in her own haunting and beautiful words. These are the stories of the Chinese government’s attempts to silence a people, and of those who refuse to be silenced. ●

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Behind Xi Jinping's Great Wall of Iron

How China's Uyghur population became the target of a merciless campaign of collective punishment

By John Simpson

The 12 million Uyghurs in Xinjiang, China, are suffering one of the most intense policies of collective punishment since the end of the Second World War: a campaign designed to change them as a people, remould their beliefs, and limit their numbers. As far back as 2018 a United Nations committee cited reports that between one and two million Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities had been incarcerated in political camps. A much larger number have been repressed and maltreated because of their religion, ethnicity and opinions. These are not just excesses committed by overenthusiastic local officials; they are key elements in a policy set out personally by President Xi Jinping.

At first, Chinese officials blandly denied everything – a position repeated in October 2020 when Beijing's UN ambassador issued a

statement claiming that “China's achievements in human rights development are widely recognised”. Then they fell back on the argument that the policy was justified.

There has indeed been a history of terrorism by Islamic and nationalist extremists among the Uyghurs. It is estimated as many as 5,000 went to join Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, making the Uyghurs one of the biggest contingents of foreign fighters within Isis. In 2009 rioting by Uyghurs in Ürümqi, the capital of Xinjiang, resulted in the deaths of nearly 200 people, most of them Han Chinese who were deliberately targeted and lynched by the mobs. After that, the terrorism started to spread beyond Xinjiang. On 1 March 2014 a Uyghur group attacked a railway station in the city of Kunming, in Yunnan province, killing 31 people and injuring 141.

The following month Xi visited Xinjiang.

At a series of secret meetings with local party officials, he ordered them to use “the organs of dictatorship” to fight terrorism, infiltration and separatism. “We must be as harsh as them and show absolutely no mercy,” he said, and officials added this chilling quotation: “Freedom is only possible when this ‘virus’ in their thinking is eradicated.”

Xi's exact words are known because in 2019 someone within the Chinese Communist Party hierarchy leaked them to the Western press: 403 pages of documents containing the president's threats and injunctions. Clearly, not every official in China thinks mass repression is the right way to deal with terrorism, and some are prepared to take serious personal risks to undermine the government's policy. Xi Jinping has huge powers, and can be president for life if he chooses. Yet there exists a definite and perhaps organised opposition to him within the party.

Confirmation of what is happening in Xinjiang has come from many sources: the work of courageous correspondents such as the BBC's John Sudworth or organisations including the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ); the shocking testimony of survivors; the visual evidence of satellite and drone footage; and a surprisingly large number of leaked official documents. It has proved impossible to keep the existence of so many camps across Xinjiang secret. The Chinese authorities, having originally claimed no such camps existed, now say they are part of a widespread vocational re-education programme intended to relieve poverty as well as prevent terrorism.

Satellite images examined by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), which is part-funded by the Australian government, have identified at least 380 detention centres in Xinjiang province, ranging from low-security installations to fortified prisons complete with watchtowers, high walls and barbed wire. The ASPI noticed that many of the camps were located near industrial parks. There is no doubt that prisoners are used as forced labour in the clothing, textile, electronics and solar panels industries. According to the ASPI, 83 foreign and Chinese brands have allegedly benefited from the forced labour of Uyghur prisoners, and it named Apple, Amazon, Marks & Spencer, Nike and Adidas, among others. There have been repeated claims that much of China's cotton, which is grown in Xinjiang, is produced by slave labour.

Chinese officials say these accusations are part of a campaign of fake news and Western propaganda. Businessmen and academics from countries around the world, whose livelihoods depend on China's largesse, dutifully re-broadcast the message. Yet when the ICIJ handed the BBC, the *Guardian* and other media outlets a file of leaked Chinese government



Squeezed out: Uyghur women protest against the detention of relatives. It is estimated that millions of Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities in Xinjiang have been incarcerated

papers, the documents were examined by a variety of experts and pronounced genuine.

Signed by Zhu Hailun, the top security official in Xinjiang at the time, the documents set out the conditions under which any Uyghur suspected of terrorist sympathies (the definition is remarkably wide) should be held. Camp inmates must serve at least a year before being considered for release, and they can be held indefinitely. There is a points scheme, by which they can earn credits for ideological transformation and compliance with discipline. After this they are switched to a lower tier of camp where they face another three to six months of training in labour skills – meaning often that they learn to make things for famous global brands. The control over their lives is almost total.

The rape of female prisoners by officials

and by anyone prepared to pay for access is alleged to be widespread. Other reports, equally credible, say local authorities are forcibly fitting women with birth control devices, in an effort to cut the Uyghur birth-rate and lower population numbers.

In Hotan prefecture in Xinjiang, which is largely Uyghur, the education department issued a directive in 2017 prohibiting the use of the Uyghur language in schools and colleges. In the same year a new range of measures in Xinjiang banned the wearing of veils and beards that were too long. It became an offence to refuse to watch or listen to state radio and television. There are frequent allegations that Uyghur prisoners are forced by their Han Chinese gaolers to eat pork and drink alcohol.

Merdan Ghappar, aged 31, was a successful model in Xinjiang who was swept up in the internment process. At one point, by mistake,

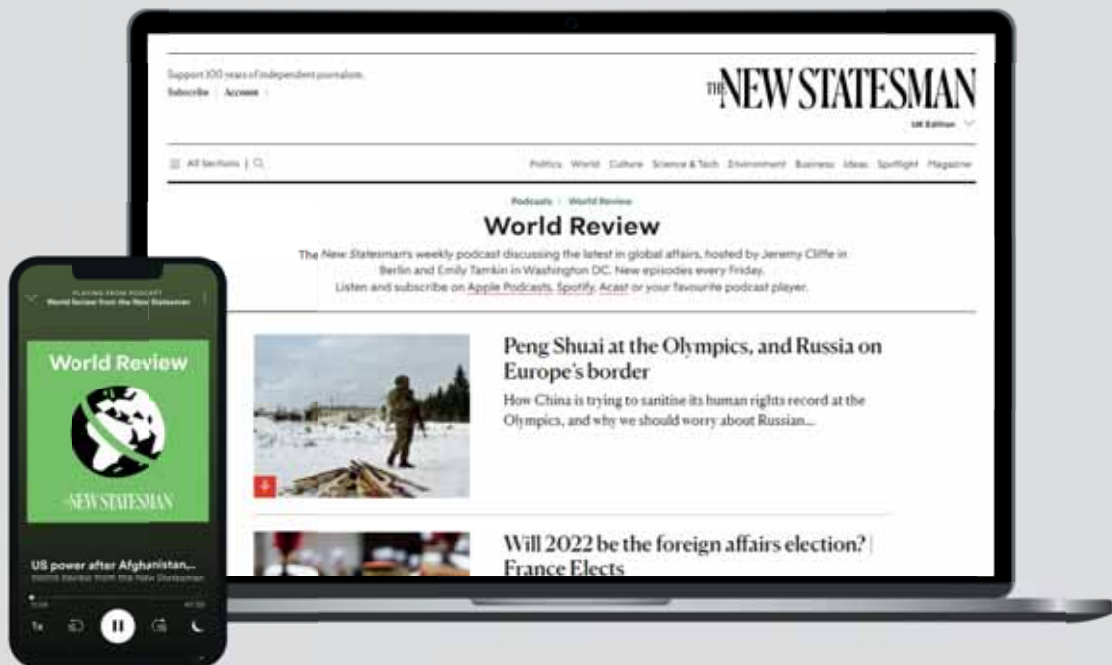
the officials in his prison handed his possessions back to him, including his mobile phone. Ghappar used this unlooked-for opportunity to send his family a video of himself in prison, handcuffed to a bed, together with an account of the gross overcrowding, screaming and beatings that he observed around him. He described the so-called “four-piece suits” which the jailers forced on prisoners who did not cooperate: handcuffs, leg-shackles and a black cloth bag over the head. With extraordinary bravery he asked his family to make the video public. They did, and the pictures were shown around the world.

Nothing has been heard of Merdan Ghappar since March 2020. The Great Wall of Iron which Xi Jinping said was required to “safeguard” Xinjiang has closed around him. ●

John Simpson is the BBC's world affairs editor

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“Fear is supremely contagious,” wrote Primo Levi, the Italian-Jewish writer and thinker who survived the horrors of Auschwitz, and who left us prescient warnings about the monopolisation of power and the systemic dehumanisation of others. His words echo in my head when I consider the persecution of the Uyghurs and other Turkic minorities in China today.

We live in an age in which we have too much information, but little knowledge, and even less wisdom. These three concepts are completely different. In fact, an overabundance of information, and the hubris that comes with it, is an obstacle to attaining true knowledge and wisdom.

Every day we are bombarded with snippets of sombre news from all over the world. The escalating humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan where millions are facing starvation; desperate migrants and refugees drowning on Europe’s borders; attacks on abortion rights throughout the US; the use of rape as a military weapon amid the ethnic cleansing of Tigrayans in Ethiopia; the violent coup in Myanmar. Meanwhile, an escalating climate crisis, an impending financial crisis and a crisis of liberal democracy and pluralism are looming.

A deluge of information necessitates faster consumption. We are catapulted from one piece of news to the next, and we treat each incident as an atomised, separate event – and then it simply becomes too much, too depressing, so we switch off and go back to our own lives. When so much is happening at such a large scale every single day, we think, what can I possibly do to change anything? This is how we lose the fight against authoritarianism.

Let us then return to the memoirs of those who have survived the darkest chapters in history, for they will guide us with their sagacity and fortitude. Fear, as Primo Levi rightly warned us, is supremely contagious, and autocrats recognise this all too well. But dictators and demagogues know there is one more thing just as easily transmittable, and that is numbness – our indifference and detachment as global citizens. If the Chinese government today can continue with crimes against humanity in its treatment of the Uyghur minority, it is because it understands how numbness works and relies on it.

When is a human rights violation deemed “grave enough” to draw the attention and ire of the global public? How many more atrocities does it take for governments in the West to react to a genocide in another part of the world? How many more disappearances or cases of forced labour will it take before China

ELIF SHAFAK



Another Voice

The Uyghurs’ plight shows the biggest threat to democracy is Western apathy

crosses the West’s “red line”? How many more children need to be sent to orphanages, ripped from their families, made to forget their own language and identity? How many more women must be sterilised by force and sexually assaulted?

The truth is that, by now, we know what’s going on in China. The Human Rights Watch report published in April last year underlined how Beijing is responsible for “policies of mass detention, torture and cultural persecution”. Western leaders claim to have red lines – hence the United States’ “diplomatic boycott” of the Beijing Winter Olympics – but it’s questionable whether they are fixed. Authoritarian rulers benefit from this vagueness, and they gain power every time demands or conditions shift.

While the West is grappling with its own apathy, the silence of Muslim-majority countries – including some of the wealthiest – regarding the persecution of Uyghurs is deafening. It is more than silence: it is a blatant trade-off. In 2019, when a group of mostly European countries signed a letter to the UN high commissioner for human rights, criticising and condemning China’s mistreatment of its minorities, more than 30 states rushed in to sign an alternative letter. Employing alternative facts, they went as far as praising China’s “remarkable achievements” on human

rights. When truth is distorted and diluted, that, too, serves authoritarianism.

We must be aware of how oppression in one part of the world encourages it elsewhere. Populist demagogues and dictators are emboldened by each other’s presence and atrocities. Last June authorities in Belarus, in an unprecedented act of hijacking, forced a plane flying between two EU countries to make an emergency landing so that they could arrest a journalist critical of the regime. A few days later the Turkish government pushed Nato allies into softening their response to this alarming violation of human rights. Belarus openly thanked Turkey for its support.

This new “internationalism” of authoritarian regimes is something we all need to be deeply concerned about. While too many Americans continue to believe in the empty rhetoric of US exceptionalism and the EU struggles with its own tides of populist nativism, it is tragic to see that dictators are the ones who understand the power of international collaboration far better than their democratic counterparts.

Every time we fail to investigate a gross human rights violation, every time we turn a blind eye to atrocities because we have trade deals or financial engagements, we are closely observed not only by that particular country’s government but also by the authoritarian regimes across the world. For they know that when one of them is met with numbness it will benefit them all.

This is how democracy loses. Not only “there” but also here, and everywhere. ●

Elif Shafak is a British-Turkish novelist and activist

Populist demagogues and dictators are emboldened by each other’s atrocities

Dreams of a homeland Uyghur culture, shaped over centuries by pilgrimage, trade, art and war, has never been under greater threat

By Rian Thum and Musapir

In Kashgar's old city it is hard to miss the Uyghur metal workers. Amid the din of hammers, huge copper teapots chased with intricate floral designs lure tourists to shops stuffed with decorative bowls and basins. Not far away, blacksmiths pound out hinges, shovel heads and other everyday items on anvils in front of their shops.

Kashgar lies within the far western borders of the People's Republic of China, well connected by rail to the factories of the world's largest manufacturing economy. Within a few miles of the blacksmith shops, mass-produced hinges and farming tools can be bought at some of the lowest prices in the world. But these items do not look or feel like the hinge or shovel of a Uyghur craftsman, whose business is supported by local customers in Kashgar, many of whom want their hardware to be culturally appropriate as well as functional.

This tenacity of cultural difference per-

vades Uyghur society, despite the Chinese Communist Party's efforts to compel the Uyghurs to adopt the habits, aesthetics and modes of production of the Chinese Han majority. Across the Uyghur region historic old cities are torn down, but Uyghurs build similarly designed homes on the urban outskirts. In the late 1960s, the Uyghurs' network of sacred pilgrimage sites was closed for two decades, but when restrictions eased in the 1980s, the shrines sprang back to life. Today, Uyghur musicians use jobs in the state's propagandist theatrical extravaganzas to support their own artistic endeavours.

In some ways, the sensory experience of a visit to the Uyghur countryside is not much different from a trip to Uzbekistan or northern Afghanistan. The garden courtyards with their intricately carved wooden colonnades; the lilt of Turkic speech embroidered with Persian loanwords; the welcome shade of silvery ►



Reduced to rubble: Uyghurs in Kashgar's



CAROLYN DRAKE/MAGNUM PHOTOS

Old Town pull down traditional homes to salvage decor and materials, 2009. The homes were marked for destruction by the government

The Silencing

◀ green poplars planted along the roads – all testifying to a shared Central Asian geography and history. The Uyghurs have been ruled from Beijing for two and a half centuries, but culturally they still face westward.

The Uyghur region, along with the other dry but fertile lowlands that hug Central Asia's great mountain ranges, had fallen under the rule of nomadic Turkic peoples by the turn of the 11th century. As the Turks gradually abandoned nomadic life, they adopted Islam and funded and consumed the sophisticated arts of the Persian-speaking literary and intellectual elite.

The 11th-century Turkic conqueror Mahmud of Ghazni was known in medieval literature for his love of war booty – one legend has him commanding that his treasures be spread before him as he lay on his death bed – but he also spent his riches funding the composition of the *Shahname*, the Persian “Book of Kings”, which is now regarded as Iran's national literary monument.

Despite ruling from what is now Afghanistan, Mahmud also appears in Uyghur epic poems, sending troops to help defeat a Buddhist enemy. And Uyghurs lay claim to the burial place of the most tragic character of the “Book of Kings”, the Iranian hero Siyavush, who was killed by his Turk father-in-law.

Over the centuries, the shared Central Asian heritage has taken on distinctive local forms in the Uyghur region, as seen in the mausoleum of Afaq Khoja, an Islamic mystic who ruled the region in the late 17th century. With a tiled dome over a cavernous hall and minaret-like towers on its four corners, the tomb evokes the turquoise-clad architectural gems with which Tamerlane, Central Asia's best-known empire builder, embellished his capital at Samarkand three centuries earlier.

But here the Timurid blues are joined with brown, yellow and green tiles, forming stripes, patches and checkerboard bands. The minarets are stout, with the slight bulge of Doric columns. Where the tiles have survived, not a single brick is left exposed; the mausoleum gleams in the sunlight like an enamelled box.

In the first half of the 20th century, before the Chinese government transformed the mausoleum into a tourist site, the building's local character was more striking. In the front plaza, a pedestal supported a tower of enormous sheep horns. Pilgrims' flags flew on long, handmade poles alongside yak tails.

Hui people, Chinese-speaking Muslims from distant provinces, adopted Uyghur pilgrimage traditions and contributed their own flags, inscribed with prayers in Chinese.

Holy graves punctuate every corner of the Uyghur landscape, though few rival the monumental scale of Afaq Khoja's mausoleum. Away from the cities, the finery of brick and tile becomes less common and, at remote desert sites, flags and animal offerings dominate the landscape. At some shrines, the flag poles are tied together in great bunches like upturned brooms, reaching ten metres or more into the sky. Their similarity to the Buddhist *labtse*, or arrow-spear shrines, of neighbouring Tibet suggests shared cultural roots.

Pilgrims once converged in great festivals on the graves of Afaq Khoja and other saints. Bazaars popped up, storytellers worked for tips, devotees sought miracles and absolution. Devotion, trade and entertainment bled together. Locals vied to bury their dead near shrines such as Afaq's and returned to pray at their family graves. Today, Afaq's reputation is mixed. While some Uyghurs see him as a holy man, others remember him as a traitor. Around 1679 he visited Tibet and convinced the Dalai Lama to support a Mongol invasion of the Uyghur region. Less than a century later, those same Mongols were conquered by the Qing empire, and the Uyghur homeland was claimed by the emperor in Beijing.

The Qing emperor enforced his new claim to the Uyghur region with a military invasion, taking the key city of Kashgar in 1759. With the exception of rebellions and a few short-lived independent states, the territory has been governed from China ever since. Many Uyghurs blame Afaq Khoja for starting this chain of outside rule and regard him with disgust. In the early 2000s, a tour guide who sometimes worked at Afaq's mausoleum told a visiting researcher: “I ask forgiveness from God every time I go there.” Geography memorialises national villains as well as heroes.

Landscape and architecture create sacred connections to the land for the living too. In Ekhet Turdi's 1999 novel *Sersan Roh* (“Vagabond Soul”), a traveller named Ekber weeps with joy as he steps off an aeroplane on to the sand-dusted tarmac in his home town, Kashgar. He reaches down, places a handful

of the sand in his pocket, and “begins to walk, his body feeling so heavy, dragged down to the land and anchored in place”.

This reconnection to the land offers the protagonist surrender and relief. *Vagabond Soul* tells the story of Ekber and his father, Atikhan, who set off on a pilgrimage to Mecca in 1948 – the year before the Communist Party of China took control of the Uyghur region. They reach Mecca. But they discover that the rulers of the “New China”, of which their homeland is now a part, have closed all roads home. The father dies in Egypt after decades of yearning for home; Ekber returns upon China's reopening in the 1980s.

One of the ironies of the Uyghurs' wide transnational affinities – not just with the rest of Central Asia, but with India, Persia, Arabia and Turkey – is that for most of the past 70 years, China has rarely allowed ordinary Uyghurs to leave their conquered homeland. *Vagabond Soul* has been immensely popular among Uyghurs because it addresses a thirst for the experience of distant but kindred lands. As the reader follows the protagonists through vividly rendered neighbouring countries, they learn about the once-typical route of the Hajj pilgrimage and the trials that pilgrims endured to reach the goal of their sacred journey.

In the 1980s and 1990s, there were liberalising reforms throughout China in the wake of Mao Zedong's death in 1976, loosening limits on expression and ushering in a golden age both for modern Uyghur literature and for Uyghurs' personal freedoms. It was this brief political opening that not only brought the fictional Akbar home, but also made *Vagabond Soul* possible. Ekhet Turdi, a craftsman's son from Kashgar, became a state-sponsored novelist in 1989, at the age of 38, following years of work as a magazine editor. He was able to travel the world during the post-Mao relaxation, interviewing Uyghur exiles as research for his novel, and he published his story of cross-cultural connection in the state publishing house, Kashgar Uyghur Press. Today, merely expressing interest in the foreign settings of *Vagabond Soul* is enough to land Uyghurs in a Chinese indoctrination camp.

Vagabond Soul is ultimately about the love of home. Though it is an adventure story that takes place in exotic, sanctified places, its end point, for both protagonist and reader, is in its opening pages, set during Kashgar's blazing summer:

His house was on Janan street. Its neat and spacious courtyard cheered the heart of anyone who entered. An acacia tree's lush, budding branches stretched up high to the roof of the broad colonnade, with its beautifully crafted wooden eaves. On

Villages are replaced
with clusters of
concrete buildings.
Farmers are forced
into factories



Home economics: meat dumplings are prepared at a family-owned Uyghur shop

either side of the acacia were saplings, one fig, the other pomegranate. Figs emerged here and there, glistening like yellow buds, and the pomegranates blossomed deep red, shining with their own peculiar form... Returning home, Atikhan drank a bowl of cold tea and went to the upstairs reception room... The house's interior was peaceful, cool, and dark. Its secluded, restful atmosphere lulled him into daydreams, and in a moment he was asleep.

The novel offers its readers the ache of nostalgia for a place most have never left, and likely never will.

In the autumn of 2005 Emet, a farmer in Tashmiliq, south-west Xinjiang, decided to host his village's first *meshrep* of the season in his courtyard, the centre of a home much like the one in *Vagabond Soul*. The *meshrep* – a village gathering with a range of entertainments – would be a good way to celebrate the birth of his new daughter, but also an opportunity to show off his latest woodworking and the beautiful carpets his sister Aysheem had recently finished knotting.

Before the shifts of the last five years, *meshrep* was connected to the agricultural cycle, which sets the rhythm of life for the small-scale farmers who make up the majority of the Uyghur population. After the late-summer harvest, people would preserve foods for the winter and sell their surplus in weekly mar-

kets. The autumn brings an end to an intense period of farm labour, and people would look forward to the regular *meshreps* that helped pass the long, dry winter.

Emet toured the village, hiring renowned storytellers, musicians and comedians to perform. Throughout the cold months, the “time of *meshrep*”, people would be watching to see where the most venerated artists performed, and they would defray the cost of hosting with tips. Some of those artists spent their summers on spiritual journeys, travelling to sacred shrines where they met with other artists, learning new stories or melodies. But they made sure to come back to their own village before winter, in time for the *meshrep* season.

In Emet's village of Tashmiliq, a typical *meshrep* began under the guidance of a local notable. Guests danced to an orchestra of two-stringed lutes, the banjo-like rabap, frame drums and other instruments. A mock legal court, staffed in part by the comedians, sentenced certain guests to show off their talents or participate in farcical games. Young lovers traded glances while the storytellers improvised on classic tales of war and romance. An auction might have been held to benefit a local family fallen on hard times. If laughter and song stretched late into the night, the host knew his *meshrep* was a success.

The Chinese state has taken an interest in the *meshrep*, which is now central to its cultural industry in the Uyghur region. In 2010 the Chinese government won recognition for it on Unesco's “List of Intangible Cultural

Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding”. The Chinese state supports lavish staged performances in the regional capital Ürümqi and tourist destinations such as Kashgar, and it trains musicians in official, scripted versions of the *meshrep* at the Xinjiang Arts Institute.

These performances pry the *meshrep* out of its community context in favour of large theatres. The audience is composed of strangers, who spectate rather than participate. Community aid, social interaction and any lyrics deemed “religious” are all gone. “The time of *meshrep*” under the moon has become the time of variety shows under the klieg lights.

Today, restrictions on gatherings of more than a few Uyghurs in private settings have made the *meshrep* almost impossible. The loss for Uyghurs accustomed to the interweaving of art, life and cultural transmission in the domestic heart of their local communities is expressed in a folk poem, recorded by the Uyghur ethnographer Rahile Dawut:

I'll take my day of *meshrep*
over your royal throne
I'll take my songs and melodies
over your comforts and ease

As the Chinese state prosecutes an unprecedented war on the Uyghurs, officials often describe their assimilation policies as the gift of modernity. Villages are destroyed and replaced with clusters of identical concrete buildings. Farmers are forced into factories. Those who dissent find themselves in concentration camps, billed as vocational training centres preparing Uyghurs for a more “civilised”, Chinese life.

Some small part of this compulsory Chinese modernity is widely attractive to Uyghurs, but much is not. Better roads and more access to cars and electronics over the last 20 years cause few complaints. But the cost has been the destruction of the Uyghurs' most important historic sites, the removal of children to boarding schools designed to block cultural transmission, the criminalisation of everyday Uyghur etiquette, and even the forced redecoration of homes with Chinese-style furniture.

If history is any guide, the success of this assimilation campaign will be uneven, and if Uyghurs are ever allowed to choose their own jobs, beliefs and habits again, Uyghur distinctiveness will re-emerge, changed but not severed from its past. It will be a small consolation for what is destroyed. ●

Rian Thum is senior lecturer in East Asian History at the University of Manchester and the author of “The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History” (Harvard University Press). Musapir is the pen name of a Uyghur academic. Read an interview with the exiled Uyghur poet Fatimah Abdulghafur Seyyah on page 48

One good thing I will say about the new Disney+ series *Pam & Tommy*: the make-up artists have done an excellent job.

First, there's the transformation of the delicate English brunette Lily James into the bold American blonde Pamela Anderson – a process that apparently involved three to five hours daily spent fitting fake breasts, dental veneers, artificial eyebrows and a forehead prosthetic to adjust James's hairline.

Then there's the gimmick that provoked such horror in Rachel Cooke when she reviewed the series in these pages on 4 February: the animatronic penis that apparently demanded the expertise of four puppeteers and which converses with the actor Sebastian Stan, who plays (its host? Owner?) the rock star Tommy Lee.

The series portrays Anderson and Lee's meeting, their marriage in 1995, and the theft and release of a sex tape that was recorded privately while they were on their honeymoon. The first celebrity sex tape scandal took place at the height of Anderson's *Baywatch* fame and six years after her first *Playboy* cover.

Unsurprisingly, there was high demand for the tape, with the violation of Anderson's privacy only adding to the allure. The TV series depicts the terrible humiliation she experiences, as well as the miscarriage she suffers during a period of high stress. Focusing on Anderson's pain is how the show morally justifies itself.

But in retelling the story of the stolen tape, *Pam & Tommy* again draws attention to this distressing episode in Anderson's life. Google Trends reports a sharp uptick in worldwide searches for "Pamela Anderson sex tape", coinciding with the release of the first episode of the series. Not only has Anderson refused to participate in the creation of the show, she is reportedly suffering "complex trauma" as a result of it.

"Poor Pam", the show says, but does so while zooming in on Anderson's cleavage. In an age when sex scenes are standard fare on every channel except CBeebies, this show still manages to be mildly shocking, particularly given that its message is supposed to be pro-privacy.

Aside from the animatronic penis, there are the very many scenes in which Anderson and Lee are shown rutting against various expensive surfaces. Of course, the real sex tape isn't featured (for copyright reasons, if nothing else), but there are plenty of scenes that have clearly been choreographed to suggest realism. If we are agreed that watching the real tape is a violation, how should we feel about the couple's sex life being used for our entertainment?

LOUISE PERRY



Out of the Ordinary Far from defending privacy, *Pam & Tommy* proves there's too much sex on our screens

This is an awkward question for film-makers in the post-#MeToo era. Predatory individuals such as Harvey Weinstein are, of course, solely responsible for their crimes, but they tend to flourish in particular cultures and sets of circumstances. The film industry offers the right conditions for widespread sexual exploitation, since it has an over-supply of beautiful young women and an under-supply of jobs, with (mostly male) gatekeepers granted extraordinary power to make or break a budding actor's career.

As sex scenes have become a routine part of filming, there are now even more opportunities for exploitation. Last year the *Guardian* published allegations made by 20 women of sexual harassment by the actor, screenwriter and director Noel Clarke, who denies wrongdoing. Some of these incidents were reported to have taken place in private, but others occurred on set. Clarke often wrote explicit sex scenes into his films and then starred in them himself. The actors he cast for these scenes later said that they did not feel able to say no.

After #MeToo, film-makers have tried placing ever greater emphasis on consent. For instance, the creators of the TV series *Normal People*, adapted from the Sally Rooney novel, crowed in the media about how sensitive they'd been in the filming

process; how they'd been so careful to enlist an "intimacy coordinator" to manage the huge number of sex scenes in the show.

But the show's two stars, Daisy Edgar-Jones and Paul Mescal, were aged just 20 and 23 when they were cast to play the teenage protagonists, having been relatively unknown beforehand. They will both have given their consent during the film-making, but their professional inexperience surely adds some context to their decision-making. After all, how many young actors would feel able to turn down such an enviable opportunity because they felt uncomfortable at the prospect of filming sex scenes, particularly when they are now seemingly all but compulsory for anyone without significant clout?

It's not uncommon for successful actors to add clauses to their contracts that guarantee no nudity will be required of them. Keira Knightley has said she will no longer shoot sex scenes filmed by a male director, and Claire Foy has said such scenes have left her feeling "exposed and exploited". These actors have the seniority to refuse; other colleagues are not so lucky.

The titillation arms race occurs because film-makers believe that's what viewers want. I wonder if they are making a false assumption. After the animatronic penis stage of sexualisation, is there anywhere left to go? Or is it time they found some other way to entertain us?

For a recent alternative to *Pam & Tommy* that is also about sex, and features media intrigue, Nineties nostalgia and prosthetics, try *Impeachment*, a sharp dramatisation of the Clinton-Lewinsky affair. It is radical in just one, important way: the victim of sexual exploitation gets to keep her clothes on. ●

"Poor Pam", the show says, but does so while zooming in on her cleavage

THE CRITICS

Books Bruno Maçães on why we are already living in a virtual world. 40

Books Adam Kirsch on the Stasi agents who fought the Cold War with poetry. 42

Interview Anoosh Chakelian meets the Uyghur poet Fatimah Abdulghafur Seyyah. 48

Film David Sexton on Joe Wright's radical musical remake of *Cyrano de Bergerac*. 53

Television Rachel Cooke on Louis Theroux's bleak encounters with the American right. 54

Radio Rachel Cunliffe on what the sex lives of animals tell us about the female libido. 55

Books

Living in an immaterial world

The metaverse promises infinite new realms just as tangible as the one we will leave behind

By Bruno Maçães

The philosopher David Chalmers believes we may be on the cusp of a great migration, one likely to overshadow every wave of human migration in history: the move to a virtual world or worlds, as the real one continues to degrade. In centuries to come, instead of asking: “Should we move to a new country to start a new life?” we may ask: “Should we shift our lives to a virtual world?” As with emigration, often the reasonable answer may be yes.

Reality+ could not be timelier. In October last year, when Chalmers had already finished the manuscript, Facebook announced it would be changing its name to Meta and altering its mission to the elusive pursuit of the metaverse, a new virtual reality platform that will play host to ever more of our future lives. With sufficient computing power, virtual reality will no longer consist of pre-packaged individual experiences. It will become a concurrent and real-time platform where billions of people can meet to conduct business, shop and have fun. The respected journalist Dean Takahashi calls the metaverse “the most difficult and important thing humanity will ever build”. It is hard to disagree. In the most ambitious version of the project, going far beyond what Meta has in mind, the metaverse is not only a new world – like a colony on Mars – but one that exists in a parallel reality, or perhaps a parallel unreality.

Those migrating to the metaverse might feel troubled by the real world they leave behind. True,



STUART KINLOUGH / IKON IMAGES

the Earth might be so degraded by climate change, pandemics and cyberwar that they would be happy to leave. And yet, even degraded, it would be real and stand above every virtual world on account of its reality.

In *Reality+*, Chalmers wants to reassure us that we can and should embrace the migration to new virtual worlds. There is nothing to fear because the worlds we are about to enter are no less real than the world we inhabit today and our lives will be no less valuable on account of being virtual.

One of his main arguments is the famous simulation hypothesis. Now that humanity is approaching the point where it can create powerful computer-based simulations, it is only natural to ask whether a more advanced civilisation, perhaps even our own future generations, might not have created a simulated world and whether we exist within that simulation, *Matrix*-like, taking it for reality. In that case we have lived in a virtual world all along and there is nothing to fear in moving to new ones of our own making.

A simulation is a substitute for an experience in reality, made usually in its absence, but it may come to usurp reality's place. It may become more real than reality. For example, the throngs of tourists in the Louvre seeing the *Mona Lisa* for the first time already have a mental idea of the painting acquired from repeated exposure to the image in books and videos. "It looks different," you might hear someone say in disappointed tones. The real *Mona Lisa* is the symbol in your mind, while the actual painting becomes no more than a reflection, and often a pale one. "It looks different from the real thing," as it were.

The French cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard wrote charmingly in the 1970s and 1980s about these odd phenomena, but at that time he had no inkling of the much stranger world of virtual reality, where the real world evaporates. What takes its place is not a transcendental structure of symbols but pure fantasy or play-acting with no pretensions to objectivity. The structuralism of modern cultural theory gives way to a relativism and playfulness older than philosophy itself.

Both Baudrillard and Chalmers miss a critical distinction. Simulations are not virtual reality. For example, John F Kennedy may have been a simulacrum of a US president: an actor delivering the perfect Hollywood image of a president and, like every accomplished actor, never giving the smallest hint that he is acting. Trump is not a simulacrum but virtual reality: someone openly and joyfully playing the role of president. During a rally in Minneapolis in 2019, he addressed his followers with wistful eagerness. "Do you remember the evening when we won?... one of the greatest nights in the history of television." His presidency was not an event in the political history of the country. It was an event in the history of TV.

Following Baudrillard, Chalmers thinks that virtual reality is indistinguishable from genuine reality, that virtual objects are real and not an illusion. If we have lived our whole life in a simulation, then the cats and chairs in the world around us really exist. If virtual objects and objects in the real world obey the same complex patterns of organisation, how are we to

distinguish them? These logical patterns are what make virtual objects genuine realities, equivalent to the non-simulated world. You might say that a mountain in the real world really exists, but the way it really exists is effectively indistinguishable from the way it would exist in an advanced technical simulation. Once we redefine reality as a set of logical relations, there is room for reality both in the physical and virtual worlds.

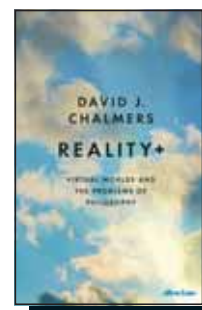
The discussion becomes more interesting in those rare passages where Chalmers moves from the logical structures of experience to cultural and historical structures, even if he seems afraid to wade into such dangerous waters. Only once does he raise the question of fake news, pondering whether, if simulations and virtual worlds are real, conjured news stories might be real too. Is Chalmers about to proclaim that the various conspiracies voiced by fringe political groups such as QAnon are equivalent to facts? Is he about to claim that Pizzagate or the birther conspiracies about Barack Obama are genuine?

He is not. At first, he argues that virtual realism does not apply to fake news because it is not computer-generated. That is an odd argument, as fake news is generated by sophisticated computer algorithms. Perhaps Chalmers means it is not rendered in complex interactive 3D scenes? But suppose it was. How would a digital reality corresponding to the world of Pizzagate fare? Chalmers does raise the possibility: "Inside the simulation would be a simulated entity, Sim Hillary, engaged in nefarious activities in a simulated pizza parlour." His answer is that while this simulation would be genuine in some sense, it could not make the allegations against Hillary Clinton true because the Hillary inside the simulation and the real Hillary are different people. In other words, the simulated Hillary is not real after all...

The argument is hard to follow and ultimately incoherent. Chalmers seems to be arguing that our structures of experience include a lot of implicit knowledge about reality and every new experience cannot contradict the implicit knowledge. A simulated Hillary violates existing structures of knowledge and therefore cannot be real, no matter how technically perfect the simulation created to disseminate fake news.

When discussing whether it is possible to lead a good life in a virtual world, Chalmers argues that people in virtual realms perform real actions with their avatars. You can write a book and make friends in virtual reality, and none of that is somehow fake or less valuable than actions in non-virtual reality. Presumably, the escape clause he used against the simulated Hillary also applies here: we can make friends in a virtual world because we bring to that experience a deep structure of knowledge about what friendship means. If someone uses a computer simulation to experience a world where everyone has been programmed to admire and love them, it is difficult to argue those will be real friendships or even real experiences. I think Chalmers would agree.

At this point, the extravagant claims at the



Reality+: Virtual Worlds and the Problems of Philosophy
David J Chalmers
Allen Lane,
544pp, £25

If we have lived our whole life in a simulation, then the cats and chairs in the world around us really exist

◀ beginning of the book about embracing virtual reality suddenly look a lot less extravagant and a lot less interesting. Rather than someone intent on showing the seriousness and value of virtual reality, Chalmers looks like someone wanting to tame its formidable but still unexplored powers. If its impact on our societies is to be constrained within commonly accepted structures of knowledge and experience, we should have little to fear. But surely Chalmers cannot believe that is the case. To return to the exile analogy, he is like a migrant who, on arriving at a new neighbourhood in a new country, immediately proceeds to make it look exactly like home.

As virtual technologies improve and grow, we are already seeing how they are starting to erode the very structures Chalmers appeals to in his efforts to contain them. One could say the whole point of these technologies is to reach deep into the ways we experience reality and radically transform them. Cryptocurrencies have not just dematerialised money; they promise to create social structures built around new forms of decentralisation, where control over the network is equivalent to the network itself. Plastic surgeons are now asked to match the settings on Instagram picture filters and people redecorate their houses in order to create suitable backgrounds for guests to pose against. Social media platforms have yanked us out of the normal rhythms of life and created an artificial world where conversation and politics happen at superhuman speeds and with such gripping intensity many find it difficult to log off. Their saving grace is not the acceptance of prior standards of truth and reality, as Chalmers believes, but that what happens on social media remains for the most part within the realm of role-playing: victims are ritually sacrificed and punished, but not literally hanged in the town square.

Does any of this sound like a world where everything is as real as it used to be? It seems that reality is a childish belief we have outgrown, but also one worth keeping as a warning against the old error: one uses reality only to deny every claim to it. If something is not real, that does not mean that something else is. Reality today has been stripped of content and subsists only as an empty form, but reality as an empty form still performs the important role of preventing a virtual world from assuming the place of the real one.

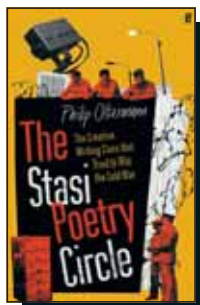
Chalmers wants none of this scepticism. He still believes in “objective reality”, a set of theses we can all agree on. “Reality exists,” he writes, “independently of us. The truth matters.” He wants to find salvation in the hallowed concept of reality. In my view, it would be better to look for it in the knowledge that truth can no longer be imposed on anyone else. In our age of unbelief, everyone can have their own virtual world. We no longer need share one single, cramped reality. Virtual worlds can be disconnected and replaced with new ones. Rather than placing our faith in objective reality, we should reach for that higher power, the kill switch. ●

Bruno Maçães is a New Statesman contributing writer and former Portuguese secretary of state for European affairs

East Germany's culture warriors

How the GDR taught its spies to use poetry as an ideological weapon

By Adam Kirsch



The Stasi Poetry Circle: The Creative Writing Class that Tried to Win the Cold War
Philip Oltermann
Faber & Faber,
224pp, £14.99

One of the ironies of the Cold War was that the communist world, which repressed and jailed its writers, seemed to value literature much more highly than the West, where writers were free but neglected. In the Soviet Union the works of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy were published in huge subsidised editions, even as living writers such as Osip Mandelstam and Isaac Babel were imprisoned and murdered. Both things could be taken as signs of communism's belief in the power of the written word. After all, the October revolutionaries were writers themselves; before Lenin and Trotsky ruled Russia, they had spent years propagandising for Bolshevism in newspapers and books.

In *The Stasi Poetry Circle*, Philip Oltermann, the *Guardian's* Berlin bureau chief, shows what happened when the communist obsession with literature came to Germany, a country whose reverence for *Dichter und Denker* (poets and thinkers) amounted to an ideology of its own. Unlike most historians of literature, however, Oltermann doesn't view the subject from the top down. The most famous names in East German letters, like Christa Wolf or Anna Seghers, are barely mentioned here.

Instead, he tells the stories of complete unknowns such as Annegret Gollin. In 1979 an informant for the Stasi, the East German secret police, reported that he had found a notebook in his daughter's bedroom containing a few handwritten poems by Gollin, one of her former schoolmates. Worried about the poems' ideological tendency, the informant, code-named Christel, copied out one for his handlers. The 23-year-old Gollin was already known to the police as a “tramper”, a kind of East German hippie, and a few weeks later she was arrested. The Stasi interrogated her no less than 36 times about the meaning of her poems, which had never been published, or even read by more than a few people. Gollin was ordered to stop writing and released on a suspended sentence, but the next year she was rearrested after she confronted the Stasi agent assigned to tail her and spat in his face. She ended up serving 20 months in prison.

Oltermann's focus on figures such as Gollin can be seen as an ironic tribute to communist literary ideals. The party's fondest dream was that the masterpieces of the future would come from the neglected voices of ordinary people like her. Yet the dictatorship of the proletariat turned out to be so invasive and paranoid that it saw any genuinely creative writing as criminal. The life of East Germany is best documented not in the propagandistic, one-dimensional novels and poems approved by the Socialist Unity Party (SED), but in the secret reports accumulated by its hundreds of thousands of spies and informers. These archives, now open to researchers in the unified Germany, allowed Oltermann to trace the obscure lives of his subjects in remarkable detail.

The seed of the book was planted when Oltermann purchased a collection of German poetry with the unlikely title *We About Us: Anthology of the Working Circle of Writing Chekists*. The original Cheka was the secret police agency created in Russia after the October Revolution by the ruthless Feliks Dzerzhinsky. It would morph over the years into the GPU and the KGB, but "Cheka" remained a word to conjure with, evoking revolutionary heroism or mass terror depending on whether you sympathised with its agents or its victims.

The Chekists in *We About Us*, published in 1984 to mark the 35th anniversary of the German Democratic Republic, were college-age recruits in the Feliks Dzerzhinsky regiment of the Ministry of State Security, the Stasi. Poetry might seem like an unlikely pursuit for a secret policeman in training, but the East German state believed deeply in the power of literature as an ideological weapon. These poets enrolled in a workshop led by Uwe Berger, a writer and editor who taught that: "Poetry had to rouse emotion and boost

Erich Honecker boasted that East Germany was a "country of readers" while West Germany was a "bestseller country"

the hunger for victory in class warfare." He told the students, in Oltermann's words, that poems should be "like marching songs: distractions from the everyday hardship of military life that also focused the mind on the ideological goal on the horizon".

Oltermann shows that this view of literature was in the DNA of the German Democratic Republic. Among the founders of the state was the communist writer and activist Johannes R Becher, who spent the Second World War in exile in the USSR and was repatriated by the Soviets in 1945. Becher believed that the GDR should be a *Literaturgesellschaft*, a "literature society", and he helped create new literary institutions, eventually serving as culture minister. Even Erich Honecker, the repressive apparatchik who led East Germany from 1971 until the fall of the regime in 1989, boasted that it was a "country of readers", while West Germany was a mere "bestseller country".

Yet it was Honecker who expelled the dissident poet and singer Wolf Biermann in 1976, stripping him of his citizenship while he was on tour in West Germany. If literature was a weapon, it was the state's responsibility to make sure that it was in the right hands and pointed the right way – at the West, not at the Party. Thus Uwe Berger's responsibilities weren't limited to teaching creative writing. More importantly, he used the students' poems to track their ideological development and filed regular assessments to their Stasi superiors.

Berger's refusal to join the SED himself seemed to make him all the more eager to serve as its enforcer. When a young officer in the workshop wrote a poem about a kite "sailing into freedom", Berger reported that "the kite was what poets called a metaphor, and that the poem was a covert call for East German army personnel to cross over to the West". A student named Alexander Ruika presented a more difficult case, since Berger recognised that he was a genuinely gifted writer. Still, Ruika had to be carefully monitored because he displayed anti-social tendencies, appearing "morose, reserved and melancholy" and, worst of all, "ambivalent".

These are, of course, the poet's classic traits: "We poets in our youth begin in gladness,/But thereof come in the end despondency and madness," Wordsworth wrote. But there is nothing ideology finds more threatening than such intense inwardness, which bespeaks a self beyond the grasp of indoctrination. In his memoir, Berger quoted a criticism he once received from a co-worker for talking about his interior world: "If you are a decent human being, then there's no world inside you other than the world you can see from the outside." This idea appeals to the zealously right-minded even today, but it is fatal to literature, both writing and reading it. *The Stasi Poetry Circle* shows in dramatically human terms why, under fanatically ideological regimes, the best writers are inevitably dissidents. ●

Adam Kirsch's most recent book is *"The Blessing and the Curse: The Jewish People and Their Books in the Twentieth Century"* (WW Norton)



Poetic justice: flowers adorn GDR officers at the fall of the Berlin Wall, 1989

SUEDEDEUTSCHE ZEITUNG PHOTO / ALAMY



What Monica Ali did next

Sex, class, race and satire power the *Brick Lane* author's first novel in a decade

By Katherine Cowles

There is love and marriage in *Love Marriage*, but above all there is sex. Yasmin Chorami, a 26-year-old trainee doctor, is the daughter of conservative Indian parents who turn the TV off at the first sign of snogging. Joe, her medic fiancé, is the son of a flamboyant feminist with a colourful – and much discussed – sex life and a book in the works about men and their penises. Yasmin wonders if she is frigid; Joe wonders, out loud to a therapist, if he is too much the opposite. Red flags wave frantically – should a couple who take a whole month to kiss get engaged after five? – but Yasmin and Joe are willing to ignore them. For, like Yasmin's parents' marriage, theirs will not be arranged but born of true love. Or so the story goes.

This is Monica Ali's first novel in a decade and, like a premature engagement, it could so easily have snapped under the weight of expectation. After the success of her 2003 Booker-shortlisted debut *Brick Lane* – a vibrant portrait of London's British-Bangladeshi community – Ali described her “sense of shame and failure” over the chillier critical response to the three misfit books that followed, including one in which Princess Diana fakes her death and winds up working as a kennel maid in America. For some, this was too bewildering – perhaps, even, too brazen



Love Marriage
Monica Ali
Little, Brown,
512pp, £18.99

– a rejection of the “write what you know” doctrine.

Now, Ali has returned to the tried-and-tested subject matter of 20 years ago: Islam, multiculturalism, family, and sexual adventure. But *Love Marriage* is not a *Brick Lane* reboot. Whereas the latter concerns Nazneen, an uneducated Bangladeshi woman brought “from the village” to London for an arranged marriage, here our protagonist is a second-generation graduate who has fallen freely into a love match with a middle-class man. The white characters that were peripheral in Nazneen's East End have now been moved to the centre: from their “chaste and cardamom-scented home”, the Ghoramis are thrust into the land of the liberal elites, where they must navigate artsy parties in the book-filled Primrose Hill townhouse of Yasmin's future mother-in-law Harriet.

It is this culture clash – interracial, interclass, inter-generational – that provides both the social commentary and comedy in a novel that takes an equal opportunities approach to poking fun. Yasmin's father, Shaokat, is the proud patriarch fumbling for control; his wife, Anisah, is mocked for her unstylish malapropisms and clothes. Harriet has an emphatic drawl (guests “come to be *stimulated*, darling”) and a fetish for “authenticity” and performative progressivism. She pressures Yasmin into agreeing to a Muslim ceremony against her will, then wonders – with glee – how many of the “*impeccable liberals*” in her circuit will be exposed as Islamophobes. Once a (self-described) *enfant terrible*, now she writes her memoir with a Montblanc. Ali's characters are robust and sympathetic, but she is, like Harriet, no stranger to playful stereotyping.

There is enough adultery in this north-London drama to fill a Hampstead novel. As Harriet contemplates liberal guilt in her sun-drenched study, acts of infidelity – a one-night stand, revenge sex, a lesbian affair – play out around her. Unbeknownst to her, she is partly to blame: Joe is struggling with sex addiction, which his therapist believes is related to “covert incest”. (Might he be expressing “sublimated hostility” towards his meddling mother? By Freud, the therapist almost says, I think we've got it!) When Yasmin discovers Joe has been unfaithful, she gets her own back by sleeping with a colleague called Pepperdine and finds, in his emotional unavailability, something soul-stirring.

In Ali's easy and direct prose, the only fidelity is to detail. The scenes set in Yasmin's overburdened dementia ward are poignant and precise, as are Joe's counselling sessions (Ali has spoken of her time in therapy during a three-year struggle with depression). These episodes help to ground a narrative that can tip over into melodrama: an unplanned pregnancy results in a beating, then a frenzied hospital dash and chance at redemption, while Anisah's sexual liberation at the hands of a gay, spiky-haired performance artist might be cheering, but feels improbable.

Love Marriage has at least one too many storylines and a hundred too many pages. But, overstuffed though it may be, it is delightfully unstuffy. A tribute to freedom and self-exploration, Ali's novel is, above all, a story about love – the bonds that it brings, and the shackles. ●

Reviewed in short

Worn: A People's History of Clothing

by Sofi Thanhauser

Allen Lane, 400pp, £20

Human beings are the only animals that get dressed, and the only animals that tell stories: the words “text” and “textile” both come from the Latin “*texere*”, meaning “to weave”. In *Worn*, Sofi Thanhauser uses six fibres – linen, cotton, silk, wool, rayon and nylon – to tell the story of clothing, from the ancient silk route to globalised supply chains. Anthropologists estimate that pre-industrial humans spent as much time making cloth as they did producing food; when its production moved from the smallholding to the factory, the simple rhythms of the day were altered.

Textile making harmed both people and planet long before the advent of fast fashion. Cotton production for instance is chemically intensive and demands huge amounts of water. It was instrumental in the colonisation of India and the slave trade in the US, as it is now in Uyghur forced labour in China. Thanhauser convincingly argues that getting dressed is a political act. *Worn* is also, unavoidably, about women: their place in the home and the value of their labour. It is an incredibly well-reported account of how fashion, far from being trivial, has shaped human history.

By Pippa Bailey

Cold Enough for Snow

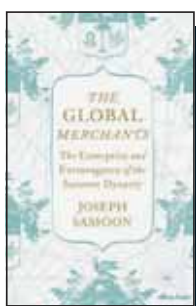
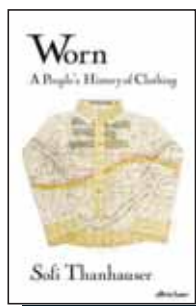
by Jessica Au

Fitzcarraldo Editions, 104pp, £9.99

An uneasiness runs through *Cold Enough for Snow*, the quietly deft and moving second book by the Australian author Jessica Au and winner of the 2020 Nobel Prize. The novel follows an unnamed narrator and her mother as they visit Japan. Together they take day trips to notable sights, visit galleries and eat in restaurants. They talk to each other, yet their conversation lacks real intimacy. That wouldn't itself be of note – not all mother-daughter relationships hold innate warmth – without the daughter's evident craving for a more affectionate bond.

As they travel, the narrator remembers moments from her childhood. The two green-tea ice creams she buys on a train recall the ice creams her mother used to give her and her sister while she did the shopping. Then she is reminded of her partner's tendency to joke about her frugality, a trait, she understands now, that was – or is – her mother's, and which she is just repeating. As these evocative scenes fall together, any semblance of her mother's form begins to break away, until the reader is left wondering: who is this woman talking to? Is her mother really there at all?

By Ellen Peirson-Hagger



A Terrible Kindness

by Jo Browning Wroe

Faber & Faber, 400pp, £14.99

On Friday 21 October 1966, a coal mining spoil tip perched on a mountain slope above a small, southern Welsh village collapsed, causing an avalanche that hit the local junior school. One hundred and sixteen children were killed in the Aberfan disaster, and this is where *A Terrible Kindness* begins. Nineteen-year-old William Lavery is a recently qualified embalmer attending his own graduation dinner when it is interrupted by a telegram: “Embalmers needed urgently at Aberfan. Bring equipment and coffins.” When he arrives, someone already on the scene explains: “The bodies recovered first were relatively intact, and most of those have been identified... Now it's getting harder.”

But Jo Browning Wroe's debut novel, which became an instant bestseller on the *Sunday Times* top ten list, is not really about the tragedy at its opening (and some readers may find the use of the avalanche as a literary device tasteless): instead, it jumps backwards in time to William's days at choir school in Cambridge. Browning Wroe, who grew up in a crematorium, uses a restrained style to gradually build a portrait of a traumatic childhood and young adulthood.

By Anna Leszkiewicz

The Global Merchants: The Enterprise and Extravagance of the Sassoon Dynasty

by Joseph Sassoon

Allen Lane, 448pp, £30

As the Rothschilds were to banking in the 19th century, the Sassoons were to trade. This Arab-Jewish family originated in Ottoman Baghdad and, says the historian and descendant Joseph Sassoon, “settled in India, traded in China and aspired to be British”. From 1830, the Sassoons rose alongside the British empire and for 150 years traded goods including cotton and silk, tea and spices, pearls and opium. From strongholds in Mumbai, Shanghai and London they established routes that crossed the world, carrying both commodities and the family name, becoming figures of significance in business, and society and politics too.

For his dynastic history, Joseph Sassoon drew on his family's correspondence, much of it written in a near-obsolete script, and he has used it tellingly and stylishly. His characters include the business panjandrums but also the art-collecting Philip Sassoon, the poet Siegfried, and Rachel Beer, the first female editor of a British national newspaper. Globalisation may have lost some of its lustre recently, but the pioneers who made it a reality remain impressive.

By Michael Prodger

Small firms face tough times, but have reason to hope

By Andrew Harrison

In partnership with



Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are facing a new set of challenges in 2022, most notably the rising cost of energy, the hike in National Insurance contributions, staff shortages, and post-Brexit trading relationships and regulations. All this while the global pandemic continues, with the Omicron wave disrupting economic recovery at the end of last year.

It is perhaps no surprise that NatWest's recently published Sustainability Business Tracker found fewer businesses were prioritising sustainability than the previous year. The evidence so far points to a growing divide, with larger businesses being more likely and able to focus on, and invest to prepare for, the net-zero future.

At the most recent meeting of NatWest's national SME Taskforce we heard about these challenges first-hand and explored how the financial sector and government can support businesses through the short-term challenges while looking to net zero.

CoGo is a purpose-first business (one that has a purpose beyond making a profit) focusing on building tools to help SMEs transition into the low-carbon economy. CEO Emma Kisby said SMEs want to do the right thing, but they are dealing with competing pressures so need solutions that can be implemented simply and quickly. Those challenges could include certification, financing, implementing carbon reductions and offsetting. "We're seeing that us as an SME, and other SMEs, are really able to capitalise on not only coming up with solutions that address the climate challenge, but also on the ability to collaborate," she said.

Each vertical will also need its own set of solutions to meet their own challenges – what works for a restaurant is not necessarily going to work for a taxi company. One of the government-backed schemes to skill up our business leaders, Help to Grow, could be the model to develop a "Help to Green" programme, said Martin McTague, policy and advocacy chair at the Federation of Small Businesses.

Kathy Caton, who runs Brighton Gin, outlined how businesses need confidence to borrow and invest in themselves. "Our overall agenda is totally focused on growing, but in an ethical and sustainable way," she explained. "But we've got some really, really huge challenges on the costs front." While the company sources locally, the costs of transport and glass within the UK have risen as export markets in Europe become harder post-Brexit, she said.

Businesses responded well to Covid-19, adapting and learning quickly in order to



Brighton Gin is one of the companies involved in the taskforce and adjusting to new challenges

survive, but the future challenges of net zero and technology will need stronger strategic planning, said Paul Edwards, who chairs the regional SME Taskforce in the south-west. “There is an enormous amount of support available; it’s quite disjointed, it’s hard to navigate and it’s often quite dependent on the end person that you end up speaking to,” he said. Tackling this disjointed picture of support is something several of our regional taskforces are looking to address as they develop and strengthen themselves.

“There is a strong desire to engage and to decarbonise, but navigating all the new big commerce stuff that is out there is extremely difficult for SMEs,” added Kevin Morgan, chair of the Wales regional task force. They too are helping businesses by

Information on Net Zero for businesses is still at an early stage compared to others

mapping the available support schemes, and are looking to provide a similar offer on sustainability – information, tools and steps that are clear and simple for SMEs.

Mark Sterritt, director at the British Business Bank, agreed that information on net zero for businesses was at a relatively early stage compared to other areas. The bank has a finance hub on its website and is looking at creating a section called “net-zero accelerator”. The aim is to develop a place where SMEs can take the quick steps to help them on their sustainability journey.

One of the key issues with accessing support and information is ensuring diverse businesses are reached. Again, the challenges are different for each business.

“I think it might need some reshuffling and rethinking of how we can level the playing field for a broader entrepreneurial sector that includes many more people,” said Dirk Bischof, founder of Hatch – a business that supports under-represented entrepreneurs. Bischof spoke of how its core offer revolves around the “three Cs” of capital, access to customers, and access to connections and support. “Over 53 percent of black and brown founders currently cite capital as a major barrier for growth,” he said. “Often they can’t apply to

the various schemes and start-up schemes that are out there because they’re micro businesses.”

“The biggest issue for us is about pipeline, and making sure entrepreneurs from diverse communities make their way to the right sources of funding,” said Jenny Tooth, CEO of the UK Business Angels Association, which represents angel investors. She explained how it has recently launched guidelines for business angel investment in diversity. They aim to improve access to opportunities for under-represented groups and to change the composition of the angel investment community itself. Around 11 per cent of angel investors are Black, Asian and minority ethnic people, and there have been encouraging moves to create Black and Asian investor groups. Only 16 per cent of angel investors are women.

The challenges in 2022 and beyond are real, but with an engaged business community and the right support from the broader business sector and government, we can navigate them and lay the foundations for a stronger and more sustainable sector. ●

Andrew Harrison is head of Business Banking at NatWest Group

Interview

“My culture will survive”

In a series of specially commissioned poems, Fatimah Abdulghafur Seyyah, the exiled Uyghur poet, refuses to be “defined by genocide”

By Anoosh Chakelian

When Fatimah Abdulghafur Seyyah was growing up in Kashgar, an oasis city in the desert ranges of north-west China, her family would always leave their apartment door open. Now, they are under house arrest.

Seyyah, 41, is a geologist and poet. She is also Uyghur, the Muslim Turkic ethnic group that is being persecuted by the Chinese government. She recalls the region Uyghurs call East Turkestan – known to the world as Xinjiang – as a place where strangers would invite her in for a cup of tea as she walked past. “I never felt the place was dangerous. I could ride my bike at 11pm home from my friend’s. The whole city was like a family,” she says of the homeland she departed for university at the age of 18.

She is talking via video call from her adopted city of Sydney, Australia, where she has lived since 2017. Her childhood home was in a six-storey block surrounded by a hospital, bus terminal, two shopping centres and the primary school she attended with her younger brother and two sisters.

Five years ago, when studying geoscience at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, her phone buzzed in the middle of the night. It was a voice message from her father on the Chinese messaging service WeChat: “Daughter, I have something urgent to tell you, call me back.” Seyyah rang her father as soon as she heard his message the following morning. He didn’t pick up. She never heard from him again. In September 2020 a UN document reported his death from “severe pneumonia and tuberculosis on 3 November 2018”.

Seyyah suspects that her father was detained in an internment camp. More than one million Uyghurs are reportedly held in such camps – escapees recount

physical and mental torture, mass rape and sexual abuse. The US is one of several nations that have accused China of committing genocide.

“[My father] had diabetes and I’m pretty sure he didn’t have medication at the camp and just slowly decayed,” Seyyah says, speaking from her office at Macquarie University in Sydney. Graphs and formulae fill two whiteboards behind her – calculations for her geophysics PhD. Seyyah is dressed in a lace navy blouse and with large headphones sandwiched over her short blonde crop. The harsh office light bounces off a gold chain – a gift from her father, from which hangs a pair of her mother’s earrings.

Unable to contact her mother, brother and sister (her other sister lives in Turkey), Seyyah has been informed by indirect sources that they are trapped at home – and having their “every single phone call and move monitored”. The Chinese authorities, however, have said that her mother is “living a normal social life”.

“It’s as if I’m an orphan,” says Seyyah, who left China in 2010, after finishing her undergraduate degree in Changchun, to study geology in Italy and Germany before moving to the US and, latterly, Australia.

“I know I have this huge background, my relatives, friends, house, city, my culture, everything... I do have them, but I just can’t have them.”

When she found out that her father had died, she honoured his memory alone by donning a black dress, cooking *polo* (a traditional rice and lamb dish), and dancing to a Uyghur song that her mother used to sing while her father danced along. He was a great dancer and a “very typical Uyghur”, she says. “Very resilient, his sadness never lasted longer than an hour.” Seyyah remembers her father’s glowing cheeks, and that his pockets were always full of snacks and sweets for his children.

A year after the Soviet Union fell in 1991, her family opened a live music restaurant that served traditional Uyghur fare, Uyghur-Chinese fusion and Russian baked goods. Seyyah spent much of her childhood playing with her siblings alone in the evenings while her parents entertained customers. The children would ring the restaurant for their dinner each night. Classic dishes included *polo*, *laghman* (pulled noodle soup), *da pan ji* (wok-cooked “big plate chicken”, a modern dish she believes her family’s restaurant introduced), *gosh nan* (meat pie), and her favourite, *pitir manta* (steamed thin-skinned dumplings filled with lamb and onion). “I’ve had it since, here and there, but it’s just never the same,” she smiles. “I miss everything about that place.”

Yet the city was divided. The Han Chinese and Uyghur neighbourhoods didn’t mix. Under Xi Jinping’s oppressive regime, Seyyah’s family would only speak openly about local tensions when under their own roof, in whispers after midnight.

“We were very much brainwashed or ‘educated’ with the party agenda. It’s an everyday life thing. Even in kindergarten, we would sing, ‘Party is mother, ▶



Fatimah Abdulghafur Seyyah photographed in Sydney for the *New Statesman* by Mridula Amin

Since you left

Fatimah Abdulghafur Seyyah
translated by Joshua L Freeman

قۇم بارخاندا ئۇچراشتۇق
يالغۇزلۇقۇڭ
دۇنيادىن يىراقلىقىڭ بىلەن
ساڭا مەپتۇن بولدۇم

We met in the dunes
I fell
for your solitude
your distance from the world

كەچ كىرىپ يۇلتۇزلار يانغاندا
قورام تاشقا ھېكايە ئېيتىپ بېرىۋاتاتتىڭ
دولقۇن قايتقان دېڭىز
ساڭا ئېقىۋاتاتتى

When night came and lit the stars
you were telling stories to boulders
An ocean of departed waves
was emptying into you

دەرەخلەر ئارىسىدا
گۈل ساناۋاتقان مەۋسۈمىڭدە
بالكوندىن سېنى تاماشا قىلىۋاتقان ئىدىم

In the season when you counted flowers
among the trees
I savoured you from the balcony

لەپىلدەپ قار ياغقان كۈنلەردە
سەن تېخىچە ماڭا دەستە تىزىۋاتاتتىڭ
ئاپتاپ سۆيگۈمىزنى قوشۇپ
كېچىگە ئىشىك ئېچىپ بېرىۋاتاتتى

On days of drifting snow
still you gathered bouquets for me
The sun mixed in our love
as it opened the door to night

چۆلىنىڭ قۇرۇق ئىسسىقىدىن ئۆتۈپ كېتىۋېتىپ
سەندە قالغان نۇر جەمبىرىنى ئىستىدىم
سەن - مەن تۆتۈپ كۆرگەن ئالۋۇن
مەن - سەن ئىزلەۋاتقان ساھىل

Passing through the dry desert heat
I craved the ring of light you kept
You were a mirage that I captured
I was the shore that you sought

پەنجىرىلەر غۇۋا يورىغاندا
شۈبۈرلەپ ئېيتقان سۆزلىرىڭ ئاڭلىنىدۇ:
چىراقنى ئۆچۈرمە

When the windows shine dimly
your whispered words come:
Don't put out the lamp

مەن كەتكەندىن بۇيان
سۆزلەر پارچىلىنىپ كېتىۋاتىدۇ

Since I left
words are breaking apart

Fossil and Tear

Fatimah Abdulghafur Seyyah
translated by Munawwar Abdulla

سەن كەلگۈچە
تاشقا ئايلىنىپ كەتمەسلىك ئۈچۈن
يۈزۈمنى كۈندە سۆيۈپ چىقىدۇ
كۆز ياشلىرىم.

So that it does not fossilise
by the time you come
My face is kissed every day
by my tears.

سەن كەلگەندە
ئەڭ چىرايلىق دېدارلىشىشىمىز ئۈچۈن
ھەر كۈنى
تاڭدىن نۇر ئالىدۇ چېھرىم
تۈندىن كۈچ ئالغاندەك جىسمىم.

For the most exquisite meeting
when you come
Every day
my face soaks in dawn-light
the way my body gathers strength from dusk.

سەن كېلىسەن
پەرىشان چاچلىرىمغا گۈل بولۇش ئۈچۈن
ئۆمرۈمگە داۋاملىق ئۇل بولۇش ئۈچۈن.

You will come
To become the flowers in my melancholic hair
To become the foundation lasting my whole life

كەل
يۈرىكىڭنىڭ ئاغرىقىنى ساقايتىشىم ئۈچۈن
ئېيتالمىغان سۆزلىرىمىزدىن ئوكيان
مۇھەببىتىمىزدىن لەھەڭ ياساپ
نەپرەتلەرنى يەم قىلىشىمىز ئۈچۈن.

Come
So that I may cure the hurt in your heart
And create an ocean from our unspoken words
And a shark from our love
To consume all hatred.

مەن تاشقا ئايلانمايمەن
سەنمۇ تىرىك كەل

I will not fossilise, and you
Promise to come to me alive

◀ country is father, and party gave us the bread.”

In her first volume of poetry, *The Mystery Land* (2018), and in three new poems commissioned and translated for the *New Statesman*, Seyyah draws on Uyghur symbolism. “We use spring a lot because spring is something new after the dead winter.” She also invokes the ocean in her wistful and evocative work, despite never seeing the sea when she was growing up. “All the deserts were oceans before,” she says, viewing it not only as a metaphor for distance, but as “an arm holding us together”.

In the final stanza of “Fossil and Tear”, the image of a fossil represents “this waiting, longing to be reunited with family, friends, my culture, the homeland – it is as if I’m getting fossilised”, yet the tears “keep things fresh; they are not just sadness, but also like spring, like

the rain”. Seyyah cites the contemporary Uyghur poet Ahmatjan Osman, the 19th-century French poet Stéphane Mallarmé, the 12th-century Sufi philosopher Ibn Arabi and the 13th-century Persian poet Rumi as inspiration.

Cut adrift from her background, Seyyah uses poetry to preserve Uyghur culture and prevent it from being characterised by victimhood. “I’m scared of being defined by only genocide,” she says. “My culture is such a joyful, happy desert – it’s sandy, it’s shifting, it’s hot. My dad was always a happy person.

“I want my culture to be seen by the world as resilient. It’s been there for thousands of years. It will survive.” ●

Fatimah Abdulghafur Seyyah’s poetry collection “The Mystery Land” is published by CreateSpace

Longing

Fatimah Abdulghafur Seyyah

translated by Munawwar Abdulla and Joshua L Freeman

سېغىنىش Scent of

كۈلرەڭ grey

بىنەپشە violet

ھالرەڭ pink

قارا ۋە ئاق ئارىلاش black and white mixed

سارغۇچ ھىدلار pale yellow

قانانىڭ ھاۋادىكى يالغۇزلۇقى The loneliness of a wing in flight

يېشىلزار تۆپىلىكلەرنىڭ دېرىزىدىن ئېقىۋاتقان شولسى The shadow of green hills flowing through windows

چاقماق تۇتقۇچى لەڭلەك A kite for catching lightning

د ھەرىپى The letter D

تۈن قوۋۇرغىسىدىن تېمىۋاتقان پويىز ئۈنى A train's sound dripping from the rib of night

ئوكياننىڭ ئون مېتىر نېرىسى Ten metres away in the ocean

قاپ ئوتتۇرىدا لەيلەۋاتقان Floating in the very middle

ئايسىز يەلكەنلىك كېمە A moonless sailboat

ھەممە چۆككەن All is sunken

خىرۇستاللاردەك سوغۇق Cold as crystal

قاپقاراڭغۇ ئوكيان The pitch-dark ocean

بۇلدۇق، بۇلدۇق، بۇلدۇق The babble of water

قاراڭغۇ ئوكيان The dark ocean

ھىدلاردىن ئۆچكەن ياش تامچىسى A teardrop fading from the scents

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Film

Seeing past the nose

In this extravagant musical take on *Cyrano de Bergerac*, Joe Wright radically revises the physical challenges of his hero

By David Sexton

Many people like musicals, and they deserve just as much respect as everybody else. Reviewing Edmond Rostand's play *Cyrano de Bergerac* on its first London performance in 1898, the critic Max Beerbohm predicted that its hero – an exceptionally talented soldier and poet whose only obstacle in life is the large nose that thwarts his quest for love – would become as inevitable a fixture in romance as Don Quixote or Don Juan, Punch or Pierrot, and, like them, would never date. “Cyrano will soon crop up in opera and ballet,” he forecast. And in a musical too, now.

The standout among the countless adaptations in many forms has been the 1990 film starring Gérard Depardieu, so forcefully appealing despite an obscene prong of a proboscis. The director Joe Wright says that he saw it when he was an anxiety-riddled adolescent, and the story, about feeling unworthy of love, had a profound effect on him. “But I couldn't see making a new version because I could never see past ‘the nose.’”

Now the nose has been ditched. Just before the pandemic, Wright saw the *Cyrano* musical written by Erica Schmidt, produced in the US, starring Peter Dinklage (Tyrion Lannister in *Game of Thrones*) as Cyrano and Haley Bennett as Roxanne, with music by members of rock band the National. Schmidt had radically revised the physical challenge Cyrano faces ▶



No match: Peter Dinklage, who is perfectly cast as the frustrated Cyrano, brings more to his role than Haley Bennett does to hers

◀ (Dinklage has dwarfism). The nose was always a bit of a conundrum – even more so today when bad ones can be readily fixed. No man by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature, though.

Wright, still best known for *Pride and Prejudice* (2005), *Atonement* (2007) and *Anna Karenina* (2012), rather than his more recent work, has always specialised in frustrated romance. He sees this project, developed since the pandemic, as especially relevant now, nothing less than “a love letter to love”.

He also maintains that *Cyrano* is “a musical for people who don’t like musicals”, since he’s not “that into them” himself. Put another way, this project is a bold attempt to duplicate some of the success of 2012’s *Les Misérables*, which his friend Tom Hooper so signally failed to do himself with his calamitous travesty *Cats* (2019).

As in *Cats*, the singing is live, in the pursuit of naturalism and spontaneity. Dinklage turns out to have a fine, gravelly voice, and the music is undemanding balladeering, decorated with occasional Philip Glass-type pulsing, rather than monstrous belters.

Mercifully, Wright does not emulate Tom Hooper’s penchant for zooming down the throats of his stars as if constantly leaping forward from the front row. Instead, filmed in the baroque splendour of Noto in Sicily, with lots of long takes and fluid tracking shots, Wright indulges his love of extravagant design and theatrical effects, choreographed to the utmost (there’s a ballet of bakers, a snowstorm of letters). The battle scenes of the fourth act, filmed in wintry conditions on Mount Etna, are equally stylised, severely monochrome, evoking the trenches of the First World War, while – for the tragic finale – all is luminous and white, a minimalist dream.

Dinklage is carefully filmed from low angles and he convincingly carries off Cyrano’s physical feats, beating the fop Valvert in a duel in the theatre. He’s just right for the part, despite being carelessly American rather than in any way Gascon. All the experience of his own life can be felt here in his bearing – that mix of self-possession and susceptibility, humour and aggression – in a way that would never be possible with an actor with a mere prosthetic schnozz. So that works.

So too does the hint that the whole business of Cyrano fooling Roxanne into believing she loves handsome but dumb Christian (Kelvin Harrison Jr) for the wit of his letters is actually quite contemporary, being surprisingly similar to the deceptions practised in online dating: classic catfishing indeed.

What feels rather more disconcerting is the extent to which this *Cyrano* is a family affair. Peter Dinklage has been married to Erica Schmidt since 2005. Joe Wright has been in a relationship for several years with Haley Bennett. The couple have a daughter.

It’s a familiar scenario, the director and the star – but Bennett brings less to her role than Dinklage does to his. Miscast, perhaps? But what do we dunces who don’t like musicals know? ●

“*Cyrano*” is in cinemas from 25 February

Television

Needy neo-Nazis

By Rachel Cooke

**Louis Theroux’s
Forbidden
America**
BBC Two, aired
13 February, 9pm;
now on catch-up

Remember Boaty McBoatface? Well, in Kentucky, there’s a far-right activist called Beardson Beardly whose luxuriant facial hair makes him look (though I’m not sure he fully grasps this) more like a hipster baker than a guy who (allegedly) likes to use the Nazi salute. Beardly’s politics may be viler than his cute name suggests (he’s a rabid supporter of Nick Fuentes, the founder of the America First Political Action Convention, who disapproves of interracial relationships and believes the US should be white majority and that no group is more protected than “the Jews”), but he’s a total baby. “My country’s better than yours!” he shouts at Louis Theroux when the two of them fall out about five minutes after first meeting. “I’m cooler than you!” It’s like listening to a ten-year-old who’s drunk too much Sunny D. Time for a little lie-down, Beardly!

I wonder. Does the rank inadequacy of Beardly and his associates (we’ll get back to those goons in a sec) make them more, or less, terrifying in political terms? In this, the first documentary in his new series, *Forbidden America*, Theroux performs what I can only



Take the skinheads bawling: Louis Theroux meets America’s childish far right

DAN DEWSBURY / BBC

describe as a precision evisceration on them, and yet I still can't convincingly answer this question. Surely they're too thick to achieve anything close to real political power, for all that Fuentes's pal Baked Alaska – an alt-right troll who attended the Capitol riot in person – believes he (Fuentes) will one day be president. But then again, neither their stupidity nor their inadequacy is likely to prevent them from influencing large numbers of other stupid, inadequate people. Clips from Fuentes's three-hour evening show, streamed live from his home in Chicago, reach millions online. There's a reason some experts believe the far right now poses the greatest terrorist threat to the US.

Theroux is braver than he used to be – or rather, he's less happy to play the innocent. First, he flushes out his interviewees' politics (not difficult), and then, with almost equal swiftness, he reduces them to a kind of nappy-state (a diaper-state, if any of them are reading this), all neediness and tantrums and wobbling lips. All this takes is the smallest contradiction. Ostensibly, the internet has given these gamers ("Fortnite is the new golf course," as Fuentes puts it) everything they could possibly want: for their generation, a support base – like sex or fast food – is only a click away. But no amount of anything can truly sate their ineffable existential hunger.

When they chant "Christ is king!" or rant about how white people are "done with being bullied", what they're really expressing is their broken-heartedness. The world is big, and they're tiny, and however many likes they get, still they remain, in essence, invisible. We never meet, you notice, any wives or girlfriends. People on the right talk of the politics of envy, meaning the taxation-hungry left. But it works the other way round, too. When Fuentes calls Theroux "pretentious", some part of him, we sense, is envious; he wants what he purports to loathe.

We're a long way now from Theroux's encounters with, say, Paul Daniels and Debbie McGee. There's no mutual delight here. Trapped in Fuentes's basement as he recorded his extended rant, Theroux looked like he longed to stuff his ears with string cheese, or whatever else his adolescent interviewee might have had in his refrigerator. Baked Alaska's house in Phoenix, Arizona, came with a joyless Mc-swimming pool, surrounded by dun-coloured walls and the kind of brittle sun loungers that leave ugly weals on a body; Theroux stared at it disconsolately, a prisoner in a yard.

The film reached its climax in Tampa, Florida, where Alaska really did look baked – what a sweaty Betty! – as he paraded the streets with his camera, blasting out 1930s German marching songs in exchange for a few dollars from the pathetically small crowd watching online. There was shouting in a car park, and the weird spectacle of Theroux refusing to apologise for being white (Alaska said that he should, for this is what white people must do in liberal America). Oh, the bleakness, the desolation. Next time, when Theroux investigates "rap's new front line", there'll be lots of guns, and I will be watching... hopefully something cosy with Roger Allam on BritBox. ●

Radio

The messy sex lives of monkeys

By Rachel Cunliffe

Political Animals
BBC Radio 4,
18 February, 11am

I'll be honest, I've never thought much about the sex lives of capuchin monkeys. But once the zoologist Lucy Cooke introduces the topic, I can't get it out of my head. *Political Animals* opens with horny females pouting and primping to seduce as many males as possible. Darwin's evolutionary theory purports that they should be coy, letting the males compete for their affections. But no one seems to have told them that.

A delightful mix of science, history and feminism, this show is all about "celebrating stories of females in the natural world that defy sexist stereotypes". Many of our assumptions about gender dynamics in the animal kingdom are, Cooke explains, the product of outdated Victorian misconceptions. Darwin was a genius, but also a man of his time. His assessment of "dominant" males with "stronger passions" than those of their mates has incorrectly influenced evolutionary biology since.

Cooke's effort to correct the record throws up some astonishing findings. To return to the capuchins, female promiscuity that would have horrified Victorian sensibilities is actually a form of maternal protection: a male is less likely to attack an infant if there's a chance it might be his offspring. And lest we think it's all about mammals, a female Jacana bird enjoys copulating with a harem of males, who all then help to raise her chicks.

We shouldn't be surprised to learn that the female libido isn't confined to human beings; the evidence has always been there, yet the female scientists who have pointed it out have found themselves dismissed as attention-seeking or driven by feminist bias. (One of Cooke's male guests makes exactly this claim, barely aware of how his own prejudices might have influenced his work.) But it's not ideological to note that animal sexuality is a lot more vibrant, messy and complicated than 19th-century moralists would have you believe. And next time someone tries to peddle outdated views about human women and their innate submissiveness under the guise of evolutionary biology, I'll have my ammunition ready. Thank you Lucy Cooke – and thank you capuchins. ●

Animal sexuality is a lot more vibrant and complicated than 19th-century moralists would have you believe



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THE BACK PAGES

Gardening



Alice Vincent

After a season of little contact, my garden and I are in conversation again

“You alright?” asked the other half, as I wandered into the bedroom, shower-wet hair combed back. I told him I’d been in the garden. “I think,” I said, “we’re friends again.”

I’ve always thought of my relationship with the garden as a kind of conversation. It took weeks to make eye contact, months to utter niceties, a year for us to crack into small talk. By the autumn, I thought we were getting somewhere, but with the onset of winter progress stilled and stuttered. We’ve not spoken in a while.

There wasn’t any great rupture, no grand falling out. It was one of those situations where murmurs ►



◀ between new friends (and we are still new friends) – missing a date to have a drink, or forgetting to reply to a message – cause the whole thing to falter a little. This time last year the balance was tilted differently: I was painting the fence, hammering vine eyes into the wall and stringing up wire. I mulched in a frenzy. I whispered sweet nothings to the first bulbs that broke through the vacant earth. Most weeks I'd open the back door with an armful of plug plants in cardboard – the results of late-night online plant ordering – and deliver them to the garden wall like an offering. I was, perhaps, a little keen.

This winter I've backed off. I threw in a few hundred bulbs, sure, but left the herbaceous tangles of late summer's perennials (a good, giddy time in our relationship) because the low sun cast shadows against the back wall and I wanted to offer hibernacles to the insects. There have been no binges on the winter sales; I've lifted and divided what grew well last year. I failed to order mulch until it was too late and used the contents of my compost bin instead – satisfying, but somehow lacking the black, weighted blanket loveliness of well-rotted manure. Then I left it be, keeping an idle eye through the kitchen window as if it were a lazy scroll through Instagram.

Until, that is, a Saturday morning in late January when I picked up a routine I'd abandoned: wandering around the garden after getting up, just to see what's going on. Bulbs shooting up, the tight red fist of a returning peony, old pea sticks and hollyhock stems drunkenly passed out on the flower bed. A lawn in need of edging. The remnant tea bags that hadn't been broken down in the compost bin.

A sodden trough, crying out for some attention and drainage. Leaves on the clematis confused about the weather. The first dark purple flowers from hellebore seedlings a family friend gave to my father, which he then gave to me, five years ago. And something else: a rush of affection, of longing, even, for this scruffy little plot.

The next morning I pulled on my overalls and went out with the eager anticipation of a catch-up pub sesh. I went around the garden with a litter-picking ferocity not seen since David Sedaris decamped to Pulborough. I collected old stakes and cut back unruly rose stems. I attended to the growing pile of scraps by the compost bin. I poured in all the care I'd been withholding over the past few months, first because I hadn't been able to find the energy, and then because I was scared of what had reared up in my absence. Beneath, I saw a garden that I recognised, and a garden that was growing.

In those first hopeful and clear-skied days of February I returned to a rhythm that has shaped most of my time here: out into the garden as soon as decently possible, usually after a shower, idly combing my hair as I inspect the beds. This is the month in which the first things – the irises and the *Galanthus*, some of the earlier narcissuses – start to fatten out and catch you by surprise. One day nothing; the next an exquisite jewel of a flower. That first hit of cortisol-giving daylight in the morning – I can't believe I managed without it.

Most relationships require a little distance, sometimes. A good conversation relies as much upon listening as it does talking. I think we're entering a new stage, my garden and I. I wonder what it'll hold. ●

This England

Each printed entry receives a £5 book token. Entries to comp@newstatesman.co.uk or on a postcard to This England. This column – which, though named after a line in Shakespeare's "Richard II", refers to the whole of Britain – has run in the NS since 1934.

Be a good sport

Manchester United want someone who is a dab hand with a duster, and also has a degree, to polish their trophies. Major parts of the role of curatorial assistant at the club's museum will be "cleaning and redisplaying the permanent displays", a job advert states.

The ideal person will be

educated to "degree level with a postgraduate qualification in Museum Studies, or equivalent". Liking football would also be an advantage. *Daily Mirror (Daragh Brady)*

New kids on the block

A pair of fighting goats blocked off the entrance to a supermarket car park. A herd of Great Orme goats was seen at Asda in Llandudno, north Wales, with one pair locking horns at the traffic lights.

Michelle Evans, who saw them, said: "They were really going at it. The two goats fighting had their horns locked while the rest of the herd was just watching.

"People were beeping their horns because they couldn't get in or out of Asda. In the end, people just drove around them. You don't expect to see

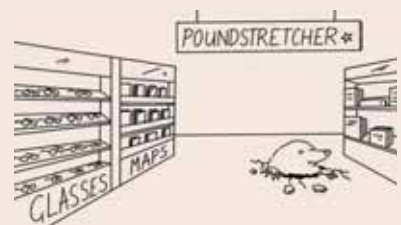
that when you go to pick up your shopping!"

BBC Wales (Neil Stone)

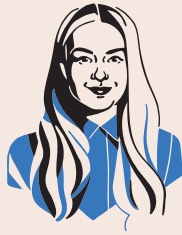
A mole walks into a shop...

A mole was rescued after straying into a Poundstretcher. A checkout worker screamed when she saw the "rat-sized" animal, which manager Judi Brewis, 64, put in a basket and carried 500 yards to woods at Stowmarket, Suffolk. "I don't know if he was bargain hunting, but he certainly caused a stir," she said.

Metro (Amanda Welles)



Deleted Scenes



Pippa Bailey

At last I have discovered what many knew all along: the joys of football

I did something recently that will shock those who know me well – and anyone who has read of my previous sporting exploits in these pages. I – willingly, without the threat of punishment or promise of reward – played football. (Those who witnessed this once-in-a-millennia event may question whether what I did can really be described as “playing football”, and I could not convincingly challenge them.)

Towards the end of last year, a good friend and erstwhile flatmate of mine posted on Instagram that she was organising a women- and non-binary-only, complete beginner’s football session. In a moment of madness, I wrote back, “Me, please! (Though I will be 110% awful).” “That’s what it’s for!” she responded. And so, one recent Friday night, I donned my sports gear (shorts over leggings – for some reason it just felt like a football-y thing to wear) and walked to my local AstroTurf, trying to squash down the self-doubt and PE flashbacks.

Our coaches led us through warm-up exercises – lots of that daft side-to-side run footballers do – drills and a short game of six-a-side (not conventional, I know, but we worked with what we had). For many of us this was the first time we had even touched a football in decades, and it was alien and uncontrollable as it rolled away from us. In one drill, we were instructed to call the name of the person we were passing to, which was helpful for learning names – but also made it woefully clear when the person the ball had landed with was not the intended recipient. I used muscles I would not have previously believed existed were it not for anatomy diagrams, and afterwards it hurt to straighten my legs for a week. While some distinguished themselves as more natural

sportswomen than others over the course of the evening, I was pleased to discover that, while bad, I was by no means left behind as a hopeless cause – a low bar, perhaps, but a realistic one.

Women often berate each other for apologising too often, too easily, and, predictably, cries of “sorry!” went up almost every time foot made contact with ball – and when, despite best efforts, it didn’t. But though I am a little exasperated that we so neatly fit the cliché, there was something gentle and kind and lovely about it: apologising to other women is very different from excusing ourselves for men. And, after two years of jumping into bushes to put as much space as possible between myself and passers-by, it was wonderful to run around and crash into strangers with abandon; to put my arms around the shoulders – and accidentally kick the shins of – a woman I had not known hours before.

When I first attended my weightlifting class, the coach often told me off for nervous giggling – too much tension defused, not enough assertiveness in the approach. But I spent much of that football session laughing at myself and making decidedly un-clever jokes in a slightly painful, compensating-for-something way, and no one commented upon this coping mechanism. We didn’t even care when some teenage boys, skulking in the dark of the park around the cage, shouted, “You’re shit!” at us. We knew it full well, and were enjoying ourselves regardless – which felt to me, a chronic overachiever, nothing short of transformative.

I say it was a moment of madness that led me to that evening, but it was more than that. I find I am motivated by doing things my ex would not expect of me; I do not want him to know me any more. The same instinct led me to say yes to my first ever skiing trip next month, though I am sure that the only thing standing between me and certain death is that I will not be moving at more than five miles per hour.

There are those who would, I’m sure, say that you should not let the ex-in-your-head shape your actions, that it allows them to retain power over you. But what, in the end, does the motivation matter if I am bettered by the action? On that floodlit pitch, my ball skills grew a little better, and I did, too. ●

Nicholas Lezard returns next week



We didn’t even care when some teenage boys, skulking in the dark around the pitch, shouted, “You’re shit!”

Spotlight Debates

Will the Online Safety Bill make the internet safer?

30 March 2022 | 6pm

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Spotlight Debates is a new quarterly event series focused on some of the most challenging questions facing policymakers today.

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Ruth Smeeth
Chief Executive,
Index on Censorship



Damian Collins MP
Chair, UK Parliament Joint Committee
on the Draft Online Safety Bill



Alex Towers
Director of Policy and
Public Affairs, BT Group

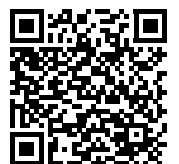
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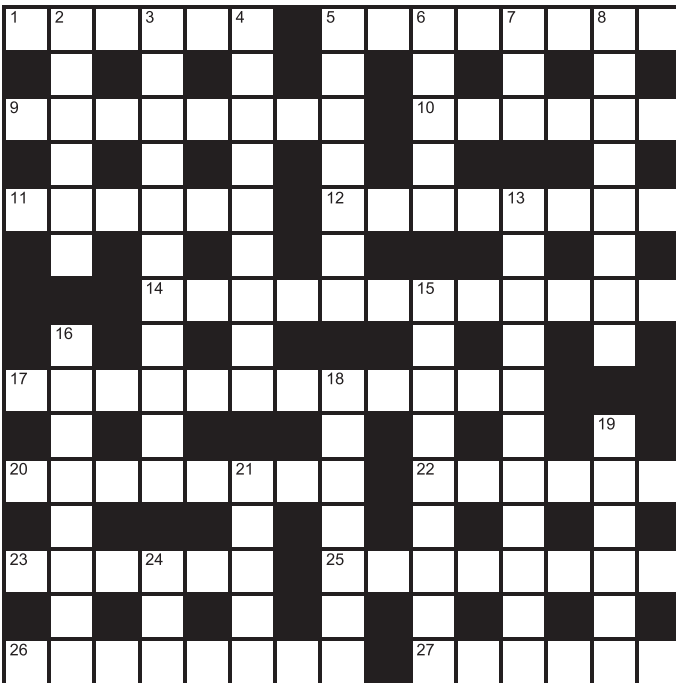
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The NS Crossword 572: by Aranya



Across

- 1 Drunk, and thus took drugs (6)
- 5 Show chap providing train set (8)
- 9 Revolutionary guards consider Spain free (8)
- 10 Leave half of stodgy school meal (6)
- 11 Salt dosage altered (3,3)
- 12 Liberal country banning Navy Rum? (8)
- 14 They make larger grade gains, staggering scientists (12)
- 17 An awful lot of porridge? (4,8)
- 20 Eccentric aspired to internalise advanced state of bliss (8)
- 22 Head of Eton College left bearing cake (6)
- 23 Plant representing Maoism (6)
- 25 Failing to ply Tom with gin and it (8)
- 26 Clergyman never, ever endeavours to entertain (8)
- 27 One dropping off stranger behind back of barn (6)

Down

- 2 Bishop energetically hugging batsman (6)
- 3 Roadside flasher made escape, swimming across river (5,6)
- 4 Tub-thumper expected to welcome one back, open-mouthed (9)
- 5 Earworm finally boring into each part of brain (7)
- 6 Journalist heartily shilling for tycoon (5)
- 7 See 24 Down
- 8 Comforts gullible folk on the phone (8)
- 13 Two girls and a boy fitted together perfectly (11)
- 15 Barbudan deli only stocks weed (9)
- 16 Add juice to last of Asti, just in case (8)
- 18 See 24 Down
- 19 Intended to dispose of third of money (6)
- 21 Angry, fiery anthem oddly disregarded (5)
- 24/7/18 Move on to Hereford, quaffing a last drink (3,3,3,4)

This week's solutions will be published in the next issue.

Answers to crossword 571 of 11 February 2022

Across: 1) Patron saint 10) U-boat 11) Replenish 12) Nightmare 13) Laird 14) Sparse 16) Oil slick 18) Eateries 20) Studio 23) Falls 24) Inner city 26) At present 27) Nicer 28) Plain sponge
Down: 2) Among 3) Rotates 4) Norway 5) Apple pie 6) Needles 7) Furnished flat 8) Vilified 9) The Duke of York 15) Antelope 17) Beriberi 19) Russell 21) Toronto 22) Unites 25) Incog

Subscriber of the Week: Andrea Wilder

What do you do?

I am a childcare manager.

Where do you live?

Shepperton, Surrey.

Do you vote?

Yes always. Women fought to have the right to do so.

How long have you been a subscriber?

Not quite a year.

What made you start?

Research material for a college assignment.

Is the NS bug in the family?

Yes. My eldest son is now an avid reader, he's a politics and modern history graduate.

What pages do you flick to first?

Anything by Kevin Maguire.

How do you read yours?

I love a paper copy.

What would you like to see more of in the NS?

I would like to see social media platforms taken to task. Fake news breeds discontent and causes anxiety.

Who would you put on the cover of the NS?

Priti Patel. We may not have the same political views, but I feel she faces a type of abuse that her male colleagues don't.

With which political figure would you least like to be stuck in a lift?

Nigel Farage.

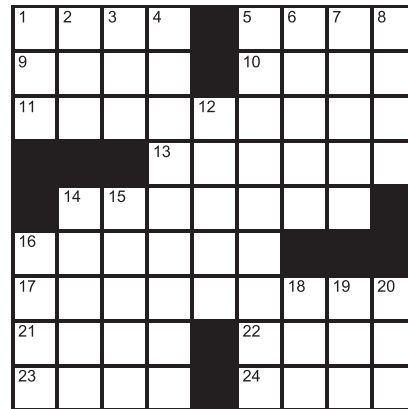
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Please email ellys.woodhouse@newstatesman.co.uk if you would like to be featured

The NS Crossword In Brief 21: by Hoang-Kim Vu



Answers to crossword 20 of 11 February 2022

Across 1) Berg 5) Sri 8) AWOL 9) Beep 10) Go to 11) Oreo 12) Skive off 14) Elk 15) Babycino 20) Silo 21) Lair 22) Unix 23) Uggs 24) Ewok 25) Boho Down 1) Bags 2) Ewok 3) Roti 4) Glovebox 5) Serf 6) Reef 7) IPO 9) Book club 13) Ely 15) Bins 16) Ali G 17) Iago 18) Nigh 19) Or so 20) Sum

Across

- 1 "The ___ chooses the wizard"
- 5 Chides
- 9 Lotion addition
- 10 Langston Hughes poem
- 11 It's usually in black
- 13 Doctor's enemies
- 14 Passes under, in a way
- 16 More chichi, in US slang
- 17 They're passed down
- 21 First action in poker
- 22 Subject of the 2019 film *Official Secrets*
- 23 Carded, say
- 24 Cyclist Merckx

Down

- 1 One of the Horsemen
- 2 Bass, eg
- 3 Signal "yes"
- 4 Absolutely knackered
- 5 Alfie or Luther, for example
- 6 Author Larsson
- 7 Eccentrics
- 8 ___ and Lovers
- 12 One that has the hump?
- 14 ___ in sight
- 15 Marry
- 16 Like pad see ew
- 18 It added lateral flow in Dec
- 19 Irrate
- 20 Large blue expanse

The NS Q&A

“Prince once said to me:
‘Own your own music’”

Maxim, musician



Keith Palmer was born in Peterborough in 1967. Best known by his stage name, Maxim, he is the vocalist in the electronic group the Prodigy. He also exhibits art under the name MM.

What's your earliest memory?

Being in infant school aged four. At the end of the day the teacher would tell us a story, hand round a tin of bonbons, and one lucky child would get to ride on the rocking horse. I always looked forward to the end of the day.

Who are your heroes?

Playing football aged ten or 11, I used to say I was George Best. As an adult I always admired Prince. When I met him in person I was confused what to say when he advised me: “Make sure you own your own music.”

What book last changed your thinking?

The Wisdom of Your Cells by Bruce Lipton. Really, it confirmed what I already knew: that your cells have their own intelligence and will adapt to any environment.

Which political figure do you look up to?

It has to be Nelson Mandela, for everything he went through. His captors tried to break him, but he wouldn't be broken.

What would be your “Mastermind” specialist subject?

The Prodigy: 1991 to the present day. And I would probably still get 50 per cent of the answers wrong!

In which time and place, other than your own, would you like to live?

In the time before colonisation and the

transatlantic slave trade. That was when black people were truly free and equal.

What TV show could you not live without?

It's not a TV show, but the movie *Scrooge*. I watch it every year at Christmas and it reminds me of my childhood.

Who would paint your portrait?

Salvador Dali. I would hate to see a portrait that just looked average!

What's your theme tune?

The soundtrack to *The Professionals*: it's fast-moving and always sounds like it's on the edge of something exciting. That's how I want every day to be.

What's the best piece of advice you've ever received?

The line “Tomorrow is promised to no one” from “Truths and Rights”, a reggae song by Johnny Osbourne. Live your life to the fullest today; you don't know if you're going to be here tomorrow.

What's currently bugging you?

In this Western world people believe a doctor has all the answers to their problems. Yes, certain medications and science are good for us. But I believe people need to look out for themselves with a healthy lifestyle, meditation, good food and enough exercise. They will find that a lot of their problems will disappear. They have the cure inside.

What single thing would make your life better?

I don't need anything else. I'm very content with my life. Every day is a lesson. I wouldn't rush my journey.

When were you happiest?

Now. I'm breathing right now, so I'm happy.

In another life, what job might you have chosen?

A film director. I would love to work on an epic movie like *The Matrix* or *Alien*.

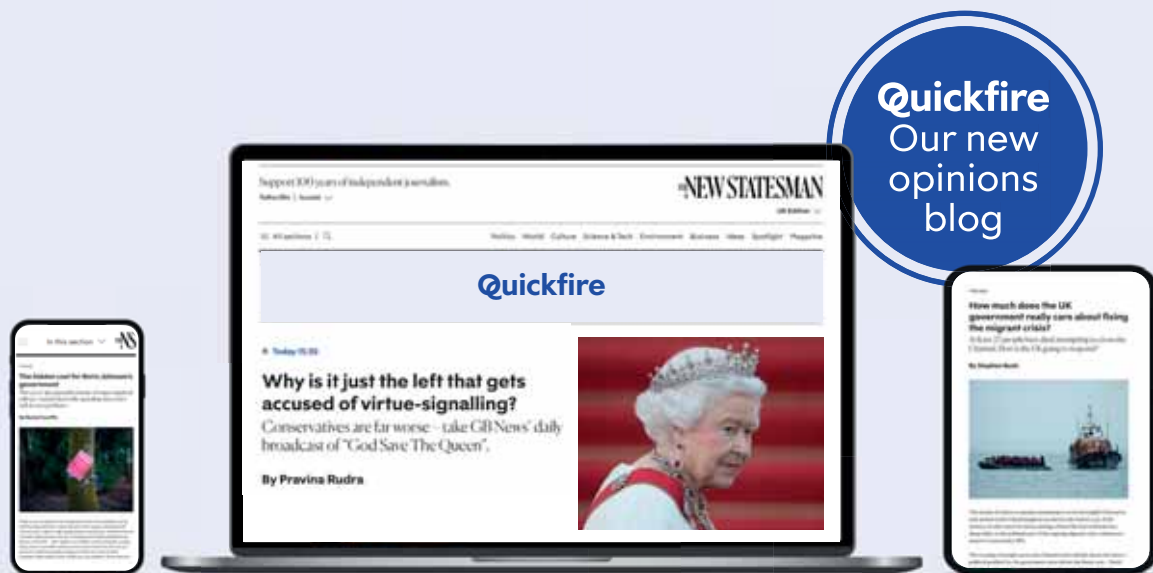
Are we all doomed?

Eventually, because man only knows how to destroy things for his own gain. As soon as he realises that it isn't the right way, someone else sees that weakness, destroys him, and then they take the reins and continue on that path of destruction. Stupid humans. ●

“The Hope Project”, a collaboration between Maxim and Dan Pearce, includes sculptures, a short film, exhibition and EP release. Find out more at maximart.co.uk/hope

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