

God Bless Putin

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March 8, 2014

BINYAMIN NETANYAHU IS VERY GOOD at making speeches, especially to Jews, neocons and such, who jump up and applaud wildly at everything he says, including that tomorrow the sun will rise in the west.

The question is: is he good at anything else?

HIS FATHER, an ultra-ultra-Rightist, once said about him that he is quite unfit to be prime minister, but that he could be a good foreign minister. What he meant was that Binyamin does not have the depth of understanding needed to guide the nation, but that he is good at selling any policy decided upon by a real leader.¹

This week Netanyahu was summoned to Washington. He was supposed to approve John Kerry's new "framework" agreement, which would serve as a basis for restarting the peace negotiations, which so far have come to naught.

On the eve of the event, President Barack Obama gave an interview to a Jewish journalist, blaming Netanyahu for the stalling of the "peace process"—as if there had ever been a peace process.

Netanyahu arrived with an empty bag—meaning a bag full of empty slogans. The Israeli leadership had striven mightily for peace, but could not progress at all because of the Palestinians. It is Mahmoud Abbas who is to blame, because he refuses to recognize Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People.

What...hmm...about the settlements, which have been expanding during the last year at a hectic pace? Why should the Palestinians negotiate endlessly, while at the same time the Israeli government takes more and more of the land which is the substance of the negotiations? (As the classic Palestinian argument goes: "*We negotiate about dividing a pizza, and in the meantime Israel is eating the pizza.*")

Obama steeled himself to confront Netanyahu, AIPAC and their congressional stooges. He was about to twist the arms of Netanyahu until he cried "uncle"—the uncle being Kerry's "framework", which by now has been watered down to look almost like a Zionist manifesto. Kerry is frantic for an achievement, whatever its contents and

¹Reminding us of the characterization of Abba Eban by David Ben-Gurion: "*He is very good at explaining, but you must tell him what to explain.*"

discontents.

Netanyahu, looking for an instrument to rebuff the onslaught, was ready to cry as usual "Iran! Iran! Iran!"—when something unforeseen happened.

NAPOLEON FAMOUSLY exclaimed: "Give me generals who are lucky!" He would have loved General Bibi.

Because, on the way to confront a newly invigorated Obama, there was an explosion that shook the world:

Ukraine.

It was like the shots that rang out in Sarajevo a hundred years ago.

The international tranquility was suddenly shattered. The possibility of a major war was in the air.

Netanyahu's visit disappeared from the news. Obama, occupied with a historic crisis, just wanted to get rid of him as quickly as possible. Instead of the severe admonition of the Israeli leader, he got away with some hollow compliments. All the wonderful speeches Netanyahu had prepared were left unspeached. Even his usual triumphant speech at AIPAC evoked no interest.

All because of the upheaval in Kiev.

BY NOW, innumerable articles have been written about the crisis. Historical associations abound.

Though Ukraine means "borderland", it was often at the center of European events. One must pity Ukrainian schoolchildren. The changes in the history of their country were constant and extreme. At different times Ukraine was a European power and a poor downtrodden territory, extremely rich ("the breadbasket of Europe") or abjectly poor, attacked by neighbors who captured their people to sell them as slaves or attacking their neighbors to enlarge their country.

The Ukraine's relationship with Russia is even more complex. In a way, the Ukraine is the heartland of Russian culture, religion and orthography. Kiev was far more important than Moscow, before becoming the centerpiece of Muscovite imperialism.

In the Crimean War of the 1850s, Russia fought valiantly against a coalition of Great Britain, France, the Ottoman Empire and Sardinia, and eventually lost. The war broke out over Christian rights in Jerusalem, and in-

cluded a long siege of Sevastopol. The world remembers the charge of the Light Brigade. A British woman called Florence Nightingale established the first organization to tend the wounded on the battlefield.

In my lifetime, Stalin murdered millions of Ukrainians by deliberate starvation. As a result, most Ukrainians welcomed the German Wehrmacht in 1941 as liberators. It could have been the beginning of a beautiful friendship, but unfortunately Hitler was determined to eradicate the Ukrainian “Untermenschen”, in order to integrate the Ukraine into the German Lebensraum.

The Crimea suffered terribly. The Tatar people, who had ruled the peninsula in the past, were deported to Central Asia, then allowed to return decades later. Now they are a small minority, seemingly unsure of where their loyalties lie.

THE RELATIONSHIP between Ukraine and the Jews is no less complicated.

Some Jewish writers, like Arthur Koestler and Shlomo Sand, believe that the Khazar empire that ruled the Crimea and neighboring territory a thousand years ago, converted to Judaism, and that most Ashkenazi Jews are descended from them. This would turn us all into Ukrainians. (Many early Zionist leaders indeed came from Ukraine.)

When Ukraine was a part of the extensive Polish empire, many Polish noblemen took hold of large estates there. They employed Jews as their managers. Thus the Ukrainian peasants came to look upon the Jews as the agents of their oppressors, and anti-Semitism became part of the national culture of Ukraine.

As we learned in school, at every turn of Ukrainian history, the Jews were slaughtered. The names of most Ukrainian folk-heroes, leaders and rebels who are revered in their homeland are, in Jewish consciousness, connected with awful pogroms.

Cossack Hetman (leader) Bohdan Khmelnytsky, who liberated Ukraine from the Polish yoke, and who is considered by Ukrainians as the father of their nation, was one of the worst mass-murderers in Jewish history. Symon Petliura, who led the Ukrainian war against the Bolsheviks after World War I, was assassinated by a Jewish avenger.

Some elderly Jewish immigrants in Israel must find it hard to decide whom to hate more, the Ukrainians or the Russians (or the Poles, for that matter.)

PEOPLE AROUND the world find it also hard to

choose sides.

The usual Cold-War zealots have it easy—they either hate the Americans or the Russians, out of habit.

As for me, the more I try to study the situation, the more unsure I become. This is not a black-or-white situation.

The first sympathy goes to the Maidan rebels.²

They want to join the West, enjoy independence and democracy. What’s wrong with that?

Nothing, except that they have dubious bedfellows. Neo-Nazis in their copycat Nazi uniforms, giving the Hitler salute and mouthing anti-Semitic slogans, are not very attractive. The encouragement they receive from Western allies, including the odious neocons, is off-putting.

On the other side, Vladimir Putin is also not very prepossessing. It’s the old Russian imperialism all over again.

The slogan used by the Russians—the need to protect Russian-speaking people in a neighboring country—sounds eerily familiar. It is an exact copy of Adolf Hitler’s claim in 1938 to protect the Sudeten Germans from the Czech monsters.

But Putin has some logic on his side. Sevastopol—the scene of heroic sieges both in the Crimean War and in World War II, is essential for his naval forces. The association with Ukraine is an important part of Russian world power aspirations.

A cold-blooded, calculating operator, of a kind now rare in the world, Putin uses the strong cards he has, but is very careful not to take too many risks. He is managing the crisis astutely, using Russia’s obvious advantages. Europe needs his oil and gas, he needs Europe’s capital and trade. Russia has a leading role in Syria and Iran. The US suddenly looks like a bystander.

I assume that in the end there will be a compromise. Russia will retain a footing in the coming Ukrainian leadership. Both sides will proclaim victory, as they should.³

WHERE WILL this leave Netanyahu?

He has gained some months or years without any movement toward peace, and in the meantime can continue with the occupation and build settlements at a frantic pace.

That is the traditional Zionist strategy. Time is everything. Every postponement provides opportunities to create more facts on the ground.

Netanyahu’s prayers have been answered. God bless Putin.

²Maidan is an Arab word meaning town square. Curious how it travelled to Kiev, probably via Istanbul.

³By the way, for those here who believe in the “One-State Solution”: Another multicultural state seems to be breaking apart.