Welcome to today’s MIT Starr Forum and Focus on Russia series. I’m Carol Saivetz. I’m a senior advisor at the Security Studies Program at MIT. And we’re here to discuss the subject that’s on the front page of every newspaper around the world today, the Russian-Ukrainian war.

We’re really going to dive right in, but just a few housekeeping notes-- I’d like to thank our sponsors, the MIT Center for International Studies, the Security Studies Program, and MIT Russia. We will have a Q&A at the end of the talk. And so please use the Q&A function in the Zoom, and then you’ll type in your questions.

There are over 500 people registered at the moment, so we may not get to-- obviously may not get to all of the questions. And now to get to the main attraction, I’d like to introduce our speaker today, Josh Yaffa, who is the Moscow correspondent for The New Yorker magazine and the author of Between Two Fires: Truth, Ambition, and Compromise in Putin’s Russia.

He has recently left Ukraine over this past weekend and he has been covering the war from Kyiv. In fact, out today in this week’s New Yorker, is his latest piece entitled “The Siege.” So Josh, I’m turning it over to you.

Thanks so much for the introduction, and glad I could be with everyone today to talk about what, indeed, seems to be just about the most important event going on in global affairs today, but one that certainly seems to have captivated a lot of interest and concern and horror, I think, all understandably.

And happy to share what I’ve seen and what I think I’ve come to understand, or at least believe I’ve come to understand about this war both from my time based in Moscow, as well as my time on the ground in Ukraine, a place I’ve been going to and reporting from not just in past months, but really going back 10 years. So I’ve had a chance to observe Ukrainian politics and Ukrainian society evolve, as well as Russian.

For me, the story begins-- though we can go back to, I don’t know, Middle Ages, the collapse of the Soviet Union, I mean there’s lots of sort of original historical points we can go to-- but I want to pick up the story much more recently in the fall and winter of last year when we started to read reports of Russian troop buildup on the border with Ukraine and we saw the first intelligence assessment suggesting that this was indeed an invasion force.

At the time, I was reporting from Moscow and trying to speak with knowledgeable and smart people in the foreign policy world and political world about what exactly was going on and what were Russia and Putin’s intentions. And the belief then among smart credible people was that this was essentially a pressure tactic, a way to gain concessions from the United States, that what Putin was driven by was a series of accumulated grievances, a sense of injustice, a feeling that Russia had been taken advantage of in a moment of weakness in the ’90s, and the time had come for him to, as it were, right those historical wrongs regarding NATO, the expansion of NATO, the placement of NATO weaponry in Europe, and Russia’s place in the post-Cold War security architecture.
And the people I spoke to in Moscow seemed to think that it was working, that by essentially pantomiming or threatening war, Russia was getting the United States to talk about issues that otherwise the US had ignored for 20 years. And so I left Moscow for Kyiv in early February with definitely an ominous sense, a kind of a bad feeling in my stomach that this could end disastrously, but nonetheless feeling like the in-the-know people in Moscow thought that invasion was not Plan A.

It definitely was on the table. It wasn't something people were excluding, but thought that at the end of the day, Putin would prefer to achieve some gains, as he understood them, through negotiations. Yes, negotiations at the barrel of a gun, but that invasion was not Plan A, but a kind of Plan B. That was the sense I had, or was at least kind of convinced that that was the mood, or the word on the street in Moscow, when I left for Kyiv in early February.

And I arrived in Kyiv, where people also were not entirely convinced or certain about the imminence of a major Russian land invasion. No one in Kyiv, or really across Ukraine, was naive or in any way pollyannaish about the nature of the threat from Russia and certainly Putin's vision for Ukraine and his intentions regarding Ukraine. People understood quite well what Russia represented both as a political and military force going back to 2014, the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of war in Donbas.

So there were no illusions there, but nonetheless, the idea of a multipronged, full scale land invasion also seemed effectively so crazy, or so hard to fathom, that it was indeed difficult for many in Kyiv, I think, including many in the country's political leadership. It sort of made no sense. Even as people-- not just in terms of kind of objectively, or kind of as Ukraine saw the world-- but even as Ukrainians understood how Putin saw the world, it just didn't even seem to fit in his kind of calculus or history of behavior.

So it was something that was really hard to wrap your mind around. If anything, people were prepared for an extension or continuation of the Donbas war that perhaps, if military conflict broke out, if Russia were to invade, it would happen first in the East, in the Donbas region.

That changed, I think, in a lot of people's minds on the 21st of February, when Putin gave an hour-long speech, a really rambling, but terrifying speech, outlining his own understanding and interpretation of Ukrainian history, or rather lack thereof-- expressing his belief based off of obscurantist and really conspiratorial readings of history, but that in fact, Ukraine wasn't really a country, or at least not a legitimate country, but rather an assemblage of territories gifted to it by the Bolsheviks, drawing a bit from Austria-Hungary, or drawing a bit from the Russian Empire.

And this lack of legitimacy, this lack of true statehood, allowed Ukraine to be manipulated by outside powers, the West first and foremost. And you got the sense that Putin was on a kind of messianic, historic mission that he defined for himself of reuniting as should be, or as kind of historically predetermined, Russia and Ukraine, reuniting perhaps by force.
He didn't come out and say exactly what his intentions were in his February 21st first speech, but you very much got the sense of a person who was on a mission, and a really expansive and, as I said, messianic mission in which no kind of tools or tactics would be too far for him. And I think that was a speech that really scared a lot of people because of its rejection of the entire idea or legitimacy of Ukrainian statehood, and the fervency of his certainty in needing to, as it were, correct or restore what he saw as the proper history, the proper historical relationship, between Russia and Ukraine.

And that's when I and many people around me started to think that, indeed, his ambitions were, in fact, quite broad and his willingness to use extreme tactics, including large scale military force to achieve them, was also, indeed, quite possible. The war for me began in the small hours of February 24th, really the night of February 23rd into 24th. I had gone to Kramatorsk in the Donbas, thinking that, indeed, the conflict, were it to begin would, in fact, start there, and sort of inch its way out of the Donbas.

And so I was in my hotel room in Kramatorsk when I got a text message just after midnight from an experienced journalist, friend, and colleague in Ukraine who said that, the bombing starts tonight. That rumor quickly spread around much of the journalistic crowd, and not only. It was a rumor that really spread that evening-- midnight, 1:00 AM, 2:00 AM.

And by 4:00 or 5:00 AM, I think few people, at least in my crowd, few of my friends and acquaintances were sleeping when, at 5:00 AM, the bombing started. There were multiple strikes in Kramatorsk that woke me up from a kind of half sleep at 5:00 AM. And I immediately ran downstairs, opened up my phone, and saw that it wasn't just Kramatorsk being bombed but, Kharkiv, Kyiv, even cities in the West. Missiles were falling all over the country.

In short order at daybreak, tanks and armor and troops were entering Ukraine from all sides-- from Crimea from the South, from Belarus from the North. And indeed, the scenario of a large scale invasion had come true. The scenario that seemed crazy to me and many other level-headed analysts was, in fact, the one that Putin had chosen and seem to have been preparing for all along.

From a military perspective, it looked like-- well, in hindsight, I think we can say that what Putin had been planning on is, what one former defense minister of Ukraine said to me, was a kind of raid, a sort of special operation, a quick lightning strike in which Russia would, with air and missile strikes, destroy Ukrainian military infrastructure and then send in a quick, light, nimble, rapid assault team to seize Kyiv, which supposedly was supposed to happen with little resistance.

But this doesn't work, of course. We see in the early days of the war that Ukrainian defenses are much stronger than Russia had counted on, I think, maybe even stronger than many officials and politicians in the West had imagined would be the case. Cities do not readily fall. Not only does Kyiv not fall, but Kharkiv, which is under incredible and really horrific bombardment, doesn't actually fall. It doesn't end up in the possession of Russian forces.
And I think most surprisingly for Russia, Zelenskyy stays. This plan, among other assumptions, seem to be predicated on the idea that at the first shot, at the first missile strike, Zelenskyy would run off. Putin clearly didn't take him seriously as a politician or a statesman, and thought that perhaps continuing or extending his understanding, or his imagination of Ukraine as something less than a coherent, legitimate country, therefore he seems to have thought that Zelenskyy was sort of less than not just a legitimate, but credible president who would disappear at the first appearance of struggle or conflict.

And that didn't happen. Ukrainian defenses held up. Ukrainian society held up, rallied around the country, rallied around Zelenskyy in ways that I think were very surprising for Putin. And Zelenskyy himself showed real courage and determination in staying in Kyiv, and almost taunting Russia, and taunting Putin with his own dedication and bravery by releasing a series of videos showing him in the capital, showing that he wasn't cowering or running from the Russian assault.

Where we are three weeks later, I don't want to minimize the challenge and certainly not the tragedy for Ukraine. We can talk about, and should talk about, the absolute, horrific destruction of this war, especially in places like Kharkiv, extraordinarily, a city rich in history, beauty, culture, a really Russian city, or Russian speaking city, that has been turned into something resembling Stalingrad, with its central square hit in cruise missile strikes, and its residential areas carpet bombed.

Or Mariupol, which perhaps some people are familiar with, a city on the Sea of Azov, crucial in a strategic sense for Russia building the so-called land bridge to Crimea, to seizing territory that will give it land access to Crimea rather than merely sea access. But the stories coming out of Mariupol are absolutely tragic with just indiscriminate, wide scale bombing of civilian areas.

In fact, it's hard to even call that bombing indiscriminate. It seems, in fact, actually a purposeful strategy on the part of Russia to terrorize and demoralize the civilian population so that-- one imagines that the strategy, however cynical and immoral it may be, but to erode the Ukrainian spirit of resistance, the fighting spirit, so that the population begs the political leadership-- Zelenskyy, his administration-- to reach a deal, any deal, with Russia because they are so exhausted and brutalized by the fighting.

And that switch represents on the Russian side rather from this kind of raid, as the former defense minister called it, to this wide scale terrorizing of the civilian population and bombing of civilian areas. It represents a switch in tactics, I think, that the Russian military leadership, and perhaps the political leadership here who's guiding the operation, has clearly understood that the first plan didn't work. And they've switched to a really, I think, dark and much more costly, certainly in terms of human lives, approach that we're now seeing unfold.

I don't know if it's working. It is working in the most kind of immediate and horrific and tragic sense, in that civilians and civilian areas are suffering immensely. We can see this in a place like Mariupol that has been under siege now for more than a week, where the casualties are enormous, people are trapped without food, without heating. They're cooking on open fire outside, in cold apartments. They're not even able to remove bodies of their neighbors and family members. It's just an absolutely horrific situation in Mariupol.
But it doesn't seem to be working, in the sense that Ukrainian resolve, the unity of society, the extent to which people are galvanized by this war, by this invasion from Russia, and really are united in the resolve of wanting to fight, to resist, to not give in to Russian demands, which have changed somewhat. I think we could say they've softened even. Though they still remain, I think, far too extreme and impossible for any Ukrainian politician, Zelenskyy himself included, to agree to.

Gone is the notion of so-called de-Nazification that Putin mentioned on the first morning of the invasion, that I and many other analysts understood that to be a kind of code word for a regime change, that Putin considering, and often calling in recent months and years, the Ukrainian political leadership to be Nazis, neo-Nazis, and so on, that de-nazification was essentially code for removing that leadership, Zelenskyy included, and installing a new, pro-Kremlin, essentially puppet regime in its place.

That talking point has not featured in Russian demands of late, but we do see a continued insistence on Ukrainian recognition of Crimea, recognition of the Russia-backed rebel breakaway territories in Donetsk and Luhansk. And it would presumably also entail Russia wanting to enshrine what territorial gains it has made in the South, for example Mariupol, Kherson, the first major city to actually fall completely under Russian occupation.

And I think those remain really political non-starters for Zelenskyy and for Ukraine as a whole, given the fact that the Ukrainian military is still holding off Russia from, for example, encircling, let alone seizing, Kyiv. Kyiv, I think, remains the chief prize in this war. That is the center, of course, and seat of politics. And any plan to try and remove and then replace Ukraine's political leadership would have to involve the taking of the capital.

And Russian forces don't seem that much closer to encircling, or as I said, let alone taking, Kyiv as they were some weeks ago. The war there really seems to have stalled, even as it's progressed in the East and the South. But even in the South, if we look at a city like Kherson, like I said the first and so far only major city to actually be occupied by Russian troops.

Cities like Kharkiv, Mariupol, they're being absolutely devastated from the sky and from artillery strikes. But there aren't actually Russian troops in the city. We can't say that those cities are under the control of Russia, even as they've been absolutely devastated, if not demolished, by Russia. Kherson is that rare example.

But what we've seen there over the past week are daily demonstrations of thousands of people coming out into the streets, chanting "Kherson is Ukraine," chanting for the occupiers to go home. And I think that presents a real political challenge for Russia.

Another part of the plan that has not turned out to be true is that Putin estimated, or it was kind of presented to him by his security and intelligence chiefs, that it would be easy to pacify, especially towns and cities in the East and West, and that Russian soldiers could roll in with little resistance, and the population would go along with whatever new, alternative political regime Russia installed.
Kherson is showing that that's not the case and that managing these territories is going to be an extraordinarily difficult and dangerous task for Russia going forward. And even in the best case scenario that Russia continues to extend its territorial domination over new cities, I don't really see a political solution. I instead see a kind of Northern Ireland on steroids scenario, in which even— even, and it's not guaranteed, of course— but even if these territories continue to fall under Russian control, I don't see how Russian authority, political authority in these territories can be very stable, but rather subject to regular protests, and even, perhaps a kind of partisan insurgency in many of these cities.

That's certainly something you hear in talking to lots of Ukrainians around the country. The degree of hatred, and animus, and passion that has been whipped up by this invasion is an extraordinarily powerful force that I don't see Russia being able to squash or control, even if it continues to achieve military success on the battlefield.

The battle of hearts and minds was lost, I think, before even the war began, frankly. That was a real miscalculation of Putin's, imagining that Ukrainians didn't have much faith in their own government, didn't see themselves connected to the state, and therefore wouldn't mind, or wouldn't resist, if Russia came in and installed a new state, or created a new state, essentially, by force. That's not turned out to be the case. There's real, like I said-- the rally around the flag effect has been palpable and powerful.

And I just don't see a workable political solution for Russia, regardless of what the military situation is on the ground. As this unfolds, as we perhaps move, though, towards some sort of political resolution, as Russia realizes that its war effort cannot be sustained in the long term, the sanctions are taking an extraordinary toll on the Russian economy.

And it also, though indications vary and it's hard to get a good sense, but there's a feeling that Russia cannot continue at this pace to carry out military operations in Ukraine indefinitely, that there will be a moment when the force tires, or when its capabilities begin to wane.

The same can, of course, be said for Ukraine here, right? Russia is not fighting in a vacuum, but also inflicting serious losses on Ukraine's military potential. But if this war continues to go on for as many weeks as it already has, that Russia may be compelled to go for some sort of negotiated solution. But in the meantime, I think the logic of the fight suggests something really dark, which is that Russia will be compelled, or Russia feel the sort of tactical necessity, to try and push as hard and fast as it can, to try and secure more territory, to subdue more Ukrainian cities.

And the way it's going about doing that, if we look at places like Kharkiv and Mariupol, is with this really terrible campaign of bombing, artillery shelling, and missile strikes. And I'm afraid that the human toll of this war is only going to rise, that even as Russia perhaps is losing momentum, it can try and overcome for that lost momentum by lobbing more and more armaments and munitions into Ukrainian cities, which inflicts-- which of course, will make the human toll of this war continue to rise.

For my story in The New Yorker this week, I visited a children's hospital in Kyiv which has received many victims— children and not only— from the fighting that is happening mainly in the outskirts of Kyiv, like I said, earlier. Russian forces haven't really entered, except in some early raids that were happening in the first days of the war.
But since then, Russian armor and Russian big military formations have not entered the center, but are held to the North and Northwest, and a bit to the East. But in those villages, places like Irpin, Bucha, Brovary, fighting has been really, really nasty with grave implications for civilians. And at this children's hospital, I walked around the wards with one of the doctors there and stopped in to see some of the victims of this war, which really sort of brought home the scale of the tragedy, and scale of the horror.

And I'm afraid, in closing at least, in my early-- in my opening remarks-- that I'm afraid things will get uglier before they get better. I don't think this war will end the way that Putin imagined it would when he ordered the invasion and when it began, but I think between now and however this does end, there is going to be a lot more suffering and tragedy for Ukraine, but also potential real catastrophe for Russia as well.

I'll end my opening remarks there and will be happy to continue the conversation, and answer questions, whatever is interesting and important to you. Thank you.

ELIZABETH WOOD: So thank you, Josh. That was really an amazing overview of what's going on. I'm Elizabeth Wood. I'm faculty at MIT in Russian history and the recent history of the region. And Carol and I are both going to take questions from the audience. I want to start with a question, though, of my own.

I loved your comment about Northern Ireland on steroids. And I'm curious if you will comment on the Ukrainian resolve, which has been really extraordinary. Everybody is noticing it. Tell us, what are the words that Ukrainians are using? What do they say, especially not just what they say about, "Slava Ukraini," "Praise to Ukraine," but what are they saying about what they think will happen if Putin takes over? What's their vision of the Russian takeover?

I think that viewers will need to hear, how bad do they think it will be? Clearly, they're fighting very hard. What are you hearing from them about this conflict?

JOSHUA YAFFA: Well, what has struck me is just-- and this is not surprising, I guess but it has nonetheless made an impression on me-- was just the degree of anger, hate, just real, visceral kind of white, hot hatred for Putin and for Russia and for Russians, I mean a real sense of an irreparable, for generations, rupture between the two countries. And I don't think that wound is going to heal anytime soon.

And I think it's sort of understandable, right? Why would one expect it to, given the horror of the last weeks? But there's just an absolute, resolute, very clear, I think, opinion or vision among, frankly, most of the Ukrainians I spoke to. And these are people who I didn't necessarily even push or ask pointed questions of, right? The kind of question you just asked me, I didn't even have to put it that directly.

All I had to do is kind of show up, and open my mouth, or just say, how are you? Can we talk? And just waves of anger and hatred poured out, and just a real sense that Ukraine was never going to look at Russia the same way, and never going to acquiesce to live under Russia's dominion, whether directly or via proxies installed by Russia-- a kind of extension of the Donetsk and Luhansk scenario, in which these so-called Russia-backed rebel territories are actually very much managed by the Kremlin, with hand-picked Kremlin figures in place-- that I found almost no one in Ukraine who expressed any not just willingness to live under such a scenario, but a suggestion that the country would accept such a scenario.
And so I think what you would see is real-- is essentially insurgent violence across the whole of the country. And it doesn't seem like Russia has, frankly, the kind of brute numbers to control such a thing. It has just enough troops and just enough armaments to destroy the country if it so chooses, and to kill a lot of Ukrainians in a way that will be really horrifying, and is horrifying.

But they don't seem to have the resources to actually run a full-blown occupation of a country of 30 or 40 million people. They're not able to do it in Kherson, in one mid-sized city in Southern Ukraine, where protesters appear to outnumber Russian security forces on the streets.

And perhaps we may see a turn toward the use of violence and the use of terror in Kherson. But for now, at least in that particular city, there are plenty of very worrying reports about kidnappings and even executions of political leaders, activists, journalists in other cities in the South. And that model may be extended to Kherson as well.

But for now, it seems like the Russians don't really know what to do. They don't really know how to administer Kherson now that they've nominally taken it over. And what does Russian authority even mean in a city like Kherson if the city legislature, for example, passed a resolution saying that Kherson is Ukraine and it doesn't want to become either a people's republic or a part of Russia? People are out in the streets every day.

I don't want to-- I don't mean to say this with kind of too, overly rose-colored glasses on. I don't think that this suggests Ukraine can hold off Russia indefinitely, or will keep Russia from destroying, or from capturing much of the country, and destroying it in the process. I think all of that is sadly very realistic, if we just look at Russia's-- its military potential, and what it can do if it continues to employ the strategy of attacking, and destroying, and terrorizing civilian areas. It has the ability to do that.

But I just don't see it having the ability to actually run a proper political administration the day after. What happens the day after they quote-unquote win the war in some military sense? And without a political solution, I think, as Americans remember well from Iraq and Afghanistan, military victories are pretty hollow. I don't remember-- I'm no scholar of Afghanistan. But I don't believe the US military lost a single battle in the war in Afghanistan in 20 years.

I don't think there's one single military defeat that America suffered in 20-plus years. But in the end, it all led to an extraordinary political defeat and humiliation. So I think there's a real lesson in that that applies to all conflicts, including this one in Ukraine.

**CAROL SAIVETZ:**

OK. My turn? OK. We have several questions in the Q&A that are all interconnected. And they seem to have-- people are interested in what you think Putin's decision making calculus was, with whom he consulted or didn't consult, as the case may be?

And the connected question is, who can influence him now as Russia is suffering these losses in Ukraine? Or is it plays to stalemate? And, as you said, even if Russia conquers, they will not be able to hold because it would take twice as many men to really pacify Ukraine-- whom is he listening to now? Or will he listen to anybody now to take advice as to what's happening?

**JOSHUA YAFFA:** All good questions that I don't know the answer to and I would be very skeptical, actually, of anyone who claims to know the answer to those questions with great certainty. It's a cliche, but certainly an increasingly true one, about Putin being a very isolated figure.
And with Kremlin decision making, or Putin's decision making, being both very personalized and essentially a black box that we don't know much about and don't have much access to, it is clear from observing from the outside that during the pandemic, certain tendencies that had already been in place earlier in Putin's rule intensified, namely the degree of his isolation, the degree to which he really removed himself from being a day to day manager, or arbiter, of the Russian political system, as he had been for the first 20 years, let's say, of his rule.

Had become a much more distant and isolated figure, consulted only with a very, very small number of trusted, long-time associates and aides. These are people from the so-called "siloviki," the security services, former KGB men like Putin, who tend to have a conspiratorial worldview, who also tend to think in terms of special operations, right?

I think that that's one reason why this war, or rather the invasion plan, was so secret, including inside Russia, and including inside the Russian government, and even military apparatus. The evidence suggests now that few people in the military, few people in the officer corps, had any idea this was coming until just before the invasion.

Some people-- some participants in it, some soldiers-- weren't even told at all. They were just given, essentially, GPS coordinates on the night of the 24th and told to go to them. And only upon arrival, were they told that they were inside Ukraine, or only in other cases, given hours' notice, in fact, that these were not exercises, but their goal was to take Kyiv and they were leaving, effective immediately.

And that-- the level of secrecy, I think, reflects Putin's own very conspiratorial worldview, and the worldview of these siloviki around him-- paranoid about leaks, tending to think of things in terms of special operations, secret operations. But that's had a real cost, if we just look purely from a military perspective on this operation, because it was never really stress-tested in any sense with other military and security officials, a plan that turned out to be not at all be effective.

The kind of Plan A of seizing Kyiv quickly, and so on-- that was, I think at this point, we can declare just an obvious, objective failure. And one reason it became kind of the plan around which there was no discussion just grows out of Putin's style of leadership and style of rule. And I think that it remains that there are very few people who have access to him, certainly very few people who have influence over him, as I mentioned in my opening remarks.

It seems he's in a kind of late stage legacy, almost messianic, period of his rule. And I think it's very hard for anyone to penetrate that, not that there even are lots of people who would have the ability or courage to try and confront Putin on something that he has, really I think, at this point, fairly staked his entire legitimacy and staked the future of his rule on.

It's hard to see Putin, or Putinism, surviving a humiliation or a failure in Ukraine. He himself has raised the stakes to the point where only victory is possible. And I think that's a very dangerous place for Ukraine, and for all of us, and for Russia itself to be in. I think that's a really terrifying proposition, of Putin kind of up against the wall in a problem of his own creation.
But it's very hard now, having embarked on this extraordinarily risky and costly operation that has proved so ruinous to the Russian economy, how can he end it without something that he can fairly present as victory? And I just don't know who around him, or who in the Russian power structure, can weigh on him. I just don't see those figures, not in the military establishment, certainly not the oligarchs.

Russia doesn't even, I don't think, has oligarchs anymore, and hasn't had in many year, at least not in the way, I think, we're used to. Thinking about them in the '90s, these are not outsized personalities with extraordinary wealth who use that wealth to influence the political system. These people, now oligarchs, Putin-style, are essentially cronies, people Putin associates who use their proximity to Putin to enrich themselves and build up commercial and financial empires, but are very much beholden to Putin rather than having ability to affect Putin's decision making.

So I don't see-- I don't see other voices imparting on Putin the need to back down or make a compromise in Ukraine. I think it can get to the point, if Russia's military is just objectively overstretched and has continued to not make the kind of progress that would allow the sort of big political solution possible that Putin could think or would think of as an acceptable win for him, there will become a point at which a negotiated solution becomes imperative from the Russian side.

But I don't think we're there yet. And I don't think that's going to come because other people are weighing on Putin to do so.

ELIZABETH WOOD:

Let me take us back to your experience on the ground. We've gotten so many great questions about the larger picture, of NATO and-- but I want to-- several people have asked, what about ethnic Russians in Eastern region of the country, in Donbas? What about Russian soldiers? Did you have that chance to talk to any of them about, would they be willing to, on the ground, attack Ukrainians?

And then there's also been questions about Russians back in Russia. Do you think that cultural sanctions will have any effect on changing their minds? You've been in Russia and Ukraine now for quite a long time. You've written the whole Between Two Fires. What's your take on, again, when you talk to people who are known as Russians, where do they stand now-- Donbas soldiers and back in Russia itself?

JOSHUA YAFFA: So I'll start with the Donbas piece of it. I spent, I guess I mentioned in my opening remarks, I was in Donbas just on the eve of the war and at the start of the war. I've also been to Donbas many times since 2014. And I'm glad you asked the question because I think this whole idea of geographic and linguistic separation is, well, if not a myth, at least an exaggeration, and that language is far less determinative, or really not determinative at all, in terms of political attitudes in Ukraine.

And that's not just true in Donbas, but that's true in Kyiv which, in my experience, is more Russian-speaking city than a Ukrainian-speaking city. Plenty of my Ukrainian friends in Kyiv speak Russian to each other when we're out, not just for my benefit. I speak Russian. I understand some Ukrainian, but I don't speak it so well. But these are friends in Kyiv, not somewhere out in Donbas who, on a night out on the town, are speaking Russian to one another.

But that sort of means absolutely zero about their enthusiasm or affection for Russia the state, let alone Putin. These are people who-- journalists, activists, Ukrainian politicians-- who are resolutely, whose whole kind of personal and civic definition and presentation, is based around being in some way anti-Russia, anti-Putin.
And in Donbas, I think it's equally messy and nondeterminative, this language question. There were pockets of support for Russia in 2014. That was a mixture of, I think, nostalgia, people being frustrated and disappointed with what 20 years of Ukrainian independence had met for them in Donbas economically, in terms of identities, sense of lost identity.

And the other piece was just kind of economic wishful thinking, this idea of, the pensions in Russia are higher than Ukrainian pensions, and so on. So there were pockets, genuine pockets, in the Donbas in 2014 of people and communities that were credulous enough to see something positive in the extension of Russia's dominion. But that's really changed.

If you just look at surveys, and public attitudes, and anecdotally, my traveling around Donbas, that since then you've seen a real growth of civic and national identity in Donbas of people thinking of themselves as Ukrainian, language not meaning all that much, speaking Russian, but that doesn't mean people are affectionate for Russia, or certainly not welcoming the idea of Russia invading, sending troops, absorbing parts of the Donbas. I found very little enthusiasm for that.

On the eve of this war, people, having lived through the war of 2014 and which never really ended-- continued all the way up until the moment of Russia's renewed invasion on the 24th of February-- people came to know full well what Russian power, what Russian military power, meant. They saw what life was like for people in the territories, in the separatist territories in Donetsk and Luhansk-- the political repressions, the lack of freedom, the lack of ability to travel, the poor economic situation.

And so a lot of illusions quickly fell away about what living under the Russian umbrella meant. And I didn't pick up on a whole lot of interest or enthusiasm in a repeat of the 2014 scenario in Ukrainian held cities and towns in Donbas when I was there in February. And we don't see the sort of people's uprisings, whatever you want to call them.

Russia hasn't had the ability to repeat now what it did in 2014, finding even if a minority, but at least a critical mass of locals who are willing to go along with the charade of holding a referendum or whatever the case might be, Russia has not been able to do that in the cities and towns it's captured in the South and East.

Like I mentioned in the case of Kherson, instead it's met real resistance to the extent people are coming out into the streets. They're coming out into the streets with Ukrainian flags to chant pro-Ukrainian slogans. And in the South just like in the East, people tend to speak Russian. Kherson is a very Russian-speaking city. Mariupol, I think, 90% is a statistic I saw.

People in Mariupol speak Russian as their first language, but that really is not proving, not at all, determinative in public attitudes or outlooks. I did not have any conversations with Russian soldiers in Ukraine, perhaps thankfully, in recent weeks. That's unfortunately without-- I don't want to make light of it. That's extraordinarily dangerous.

The Russian soldiers are not particularly approachable. There's been a number of attacks, including on journalists, including a videographer, a famed videographer and documentary filmmaker who was killed yesterday in the city of Irpin, north of Kyiv. Apparently his car, shot at by Russian troops, a car that, by all accounts, from what I understand from colleagues, that it was marked clearly as being press.
So there isn't much of a possibility not only because Russian soldiers are not at all kind of talkative or welcoming, but also present a real danger in the field to journalists, as well as to Ukrainians. As for public attitudes back in Russia, that's, in a way, the sort of $60,000 question, at least for me. I haven't been in Moscow in over a month, at this point.

So I haven't observed the situation there since the start of the war. I'm able to only kind of follow the few polling results that have come out, read articles, though that reading journalism has become increasingly hard from Russia, because just about every quality independent news site portal working in Russia in recent years has been banned or shut down. And many of the foreign bureaus, in fact almost all of them, have also sent their correspondents out of Russia, largely in response to this new law passed, I guess, last week, two weeks ago, threatening 15-year prison sentences to those who spread false information or disinformation about Russia's quote-special military operations.

So the very fact of calling it a war is already enough, by all accounts, to send a person to jail for 15 years. So that has led to a real exodus of journalists, both Russian and foreign. And that's a great loss for us all in trying to understand Russia and understanding what's happening to its society. My colleague at The New Yorker, Masha Gessen, they were in Moscow much more recently and wrote a series of, I thought, really interesting pieces for The New Yorker, looking at exactly these questions about, is it even possible to understand public attitude in Russia?

In a way, I don't know if we really can. I don't know if we can get, actually, a good read on what people are thinking. I think more than ever, people are clamming up, and afraid, and nervous to, for example, share their innermost thoughts with pollsters who call on the phone. I think that's been a problem in Russia for some time. But I think now, especially, we certainly have seen efforts to create, essentially, a kind of quasi-fascistic cult around, for example, the Z, the symbol that has found on Russian military equipment in Ukraine.

And there is a really kind of hyper-militarized, new political cult and political movement forming. And it's hard to know the extent to which people are going along with that out of genuine enthusiasm or fear. And as to the sanctions, I think they're just really ramping up in terms of their effect inside Russia. Most economists and analysts suggest it could be another two to three months before it really starts to hit people's pocketbooks.

And then we'll have to see. Do they connect the economic pain they're feeling to the policies and decisions of Putin? Or do they blame the West for targeting them in some unjust or unfair, hypocritical way, punishing them in an unjust way, and their blame goes not to Putin, but to Western capitals? I think that's also entirely possible.

CAROL SAIVETZ: Thank you, that's great. We have a number of questions that have to do with US involvement, NATO involvement, questions like, why aren't we doing more? Where are the limits? Questions about, would Putin stop at Ukraine? Are the, some of the NATO states, like the Baltic states or Poland-- not Poland, but you know-- next?

And what's your take, having been both in Moscow and in Kyiv? What are people thinking about whether the West is really going to come and help more than it already is?
You certainly hear a lot of frustration on the part of Ukrainians about the West not doing more. Here, it's hard for me to judge. I'm not a policymaker, thankfully. I have a sort of different role. So I don't have to solve these conundrums, but I can at least kind of report onward about what I'm hearing. But almost everyone you talk to these days in Ukraine-- I mean, people in the grocery store, people on the street, people at train stations-- everyone's talking about a no-fly zone.

You know, why can't the West institute a no-fly zone? Why can't the West at least protect us from aerial bombardment? That's an issue that, I think very successfully, Zelenskyy has seized upon and convinced the Ukrainian public of. Separate question is, how-- if and how-- that could ever be implemented?

It seems unlikely. A no-fly zone is not like a magic spell you cast over the skies that keeps planes from flying. You're essentially promising, or obligating yourself, to shoot down aircraft with your own weapons, which is an act of war. Something that, I think understandably, the United States and NATO allies are hesitant to do regarding Russia.

So I don't think the prospects of a no-fly zone are all that great, at least in the near term. We are seeing a lot more military weaponry flow into Ukraine. We're seeing the breaking of long standing taboos, for example, Germany increasing its military budget and sending military aid in a way that it hadn't found the kind of political consensus, the necessary political consensus or will to do for decades really.

And I think that's an interesting development and a sign of Russia really, or Putin specifically, working against his own interests, or being his own worst enemy. He's kind of creating and deepening the nightmare scenario that he thought he was fighting against the whole time. He's only making it worse. He's strengthened NATO resolve rather than weakening it. He has only increased the degree of military support from NATO countries for Ukraine rather than weakening it.

So whatever he thought he was fighting against in the beginning, he's only made worse for himself. As to the extension of the conflict to other countries, I don't think that that's so likely. But I'm hesitant to make predictions. You know, I was wrong in what I thought the most likely scenario was regarding this war. And having been sort of chastened by that, I'm hesitant to make predictions, especially seeing as it now seems like the most maximalist, pessimistic prediction will be the right one, sadly and scarily.

So perhaps, indeed, this conflict, the logic of the conflict, suggests it will spread. But if you just look from a military perspective, Russia has turned out to have a much harder time than it imagined in trying to achieve the military outcome that it set for itself in Ukraine, like we've now talked about many times. Three weeks into the war and it hasn't been able to move that much closer to the center of Kyiv now than it was in late February.

And so given that, given the need for Russia to bring in auxiliary troops from Chechnya, from Syria, apparently made an appeal, reported by The Financial Times, to China for additional weaponry because some of its supplies were running low-- all of that suggests it doesn't have the spare capacity to pick a fight with NATO, which would represent an entirely different scale of the conflict.
ELIZABETH WOOD: Which leads us, sadly, to the question of nuclear threat. A couple of questioners have asked, what do you think about-- you've looked at Putin and people around him in your previous work-- what do you think the likelihood of him trying to actually use nuclear weapons, as opposed to just threatening? But also, a very good question came in, how do people on the ground feel about that? Are Ukrainians worried about either nuclear weapons attacks, or attacks on the nuclear facilities? How is that looking from the local perspective that you've just seen?

JOSHUA YAFFA: I'll answer the second question first. People are absolutely freaked out about that. And I think Ukrainians, understandably at this point, don't see any kind of limit. There's no upper limit to the kind of violence or terror that Putin is willing to inflict on them, and I think understandably. There's nothing that Ukrainians think is off the table in terms of Putin's actions.

And indeed, they may be more right than other analysts looking from the outside who we're trying to find-- applying a sense of rationality, or what they think to be Putin's interests, to be his calculations, to be, no, he wouldn't escalate actually to that point. It's saber rattling. Well, some people thought-- myself, too, at certain points-- that what he was doing with Russian soldiers on the borders of Ukraine in December was saber rattling. But it turned out to not be the case.

We should believe what our eyes are telling us, right? If it walks like a duck and talks like a duck, you know, it's an invasion. And perhaps we should apply that lesson going forward and take Putin seriously when he does things like put Russia's nuclear forces on higher alert. I do think that was a message to the West, first and foremost, not to meddle, or not to get involved in the conflict, to not provide arms to Ukraine, to not go for the so-called nuclear option of sanctions.

Like, if the sanctions are nuclear, then Russia may respond in kind, going literally nuclear. I think that was kind of implicit in Putin's message. I still think that it was more a kind of scare tactic, a kind of cheap scare tactic, right? The story of Russia's military for some time has been that it's conventionally weak, although it has undergone this very large and very public, much discussed modernization program.

And people, I think, expected in a purely military sense for the Russian army to perform better than it has in Ukraine. But at the end of the day, Russian military doctrine calls for nuclear weapons as a kind of backstop in case of conventional defeat, if the conventional army can't hold. So I don't think we can rule out-- not so much, like, the nuking of Washington, DC, but the deployment of a so-called tactical nuclear weapon, which would still bring us into an entirely different era of geopolitics.

We would be living in a new world the day after Putin used even a tactical nuclear weapon. But I don't think we can rule that out. I think that if Putin is cornered in a fight that is increasingly existential in some way for him, that it would be folly for us to rule out any particular moves that he may or may not make. But I do see, in that particular episode of him publicly putting those nuclear forces on alert, that it was a kind of desperate attempt to send a message to the West, which was not entirely heeded.

So we shall see, right? The West indeed has been ramping up sanctions. It sanctioned the central bank, rendering half of Russia's rainy day war chest effectively unusable. It continues to provide weapons to Ukraine, including-- it looks like, the recent reports-- advanced anti-aircraft weapons. So the West is doing all the things that Putin said would merit a severe Russian response. And we're yet to see what that response could be. But I think given Putin's sort of state of mind and the stakes of the conflict that he's created for himself, we can't really take anything off the table.
CAROL SAIVETZ: Great, thank you. We have a bunch of questions about the role of the Orthodox Church, which I find personally very interesting, because there is this ongoing dispute between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. And there were people, certainly in 2014, who thought that part of the original attack on Crimea and Ukraine was being spurred by the Russian Orthodox Church. So do you have any sense, from talking to people, whether in Moscow and Kyiv, about how the role that the church might be playing? The role that the church could play down the row? Maybe even helping, if not further hindering any hope for peace, let me put it that way, or cease fire?

JOSHUA YAFFA: Right. I mean, the church is a central issue, especially in these notions of history, and culture, and these countries-- Russia and Ukraine-- being these brotherly nations, as Putin often says. But in his understanding, brotherly has a certain kind of hierarchical implication, right? There is an older brother in that relationship, whose almost kind of historic duty is to look after and take care of the younger brother.

I went to the Lavra, the sort of monastery, a historic monastery and complex of churches in Kyiv, I guess, last week or maybe the week before, but after the war had begun, and talked to some of the priests there, and talked to some of the priests who run the theological seminary there. And the Ukrainian branch, or the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which does have a historic relationship with the Moscow patriarchate, has come out really strongly and clearly against the war.

It's appealed to Patriarch Kirill, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church in Moscow, for example, to not use the kind of rhetoric that he has been using. He's given a kind of de facto holy blessing to the war which has led to a further split within the church, absolutely. I mean, there was already a split-- I forget the year-- 2019, I think, that the tomos, the creation of the independent Ukrainian Orthodox Church separate from the Moscow church.

So there's already been this really, I think, traumatic for many people in orthodoxy, but inevitable at the same time, schism with the creation of an independent Ukrainian church, but with another Ukrainian church remaining in its relationship with the Moscow church. So there's a lot of overlapping institutional relationships there. And the role of orthodoxy is a really kind of hot button one, given that it is something that so closely ties the two countries together.

But you're seeing more and more, the Ukrainian church-- this is the Ukrainian church that maintains its relationship to the greater Moscow church-- distancing itself from that church, distancing itself from Kirill. The portraits of Kirill have come down. The prayers at church services to sort of protect the patriarch have stopped being said by many priests. And you're seeing a further movement away from the Moscow church.

I don't know if it's quite going to be a repeat of the tomos from 2019, a sort of formal splitting of the churches, but certainly a rupture in the relationship. The Ukrainian priests I spoke to in the Lavra did see themselves and positioned themselves potentially as being platforms for peace and platforms for dialogue. I know less about what's happening on the Russian side.

The Russian Orthodox Church has become a very hierarchical institution under Kirill, who runs the Russian Orthodox Church in a similar way to how Putin runs the country. There is a so-called vertical of power in which priests are mentors, or forced to comply with regulations and doctrine coming from the top. There is a case already of a priest-- I forget in what Russian town-- but who gave a sermon speaking out against the war, who's been reprimanded both by the church and now by the civilian legal authority.
So the price of speaking out, the price of deviating from Kirill's message which, again, effectively gives a holy imprimatur to this war, remain high. So I'm not so hopeful that the possibility for a kind of inter-church, or intra-church dialogue being a platform for creating peace, I don't see a lot of movement there. Instead, I see, especially on the Ukrainian side, a real frustration, anger, and even rejection of the greater, mother Russian church.

ELIZABETH WOOD: So that-- I'm so glad you answered that question because I think-- I guess a small follow up question is, to what extent do you think the Russian Orthodox Church is actually behind Putin's vision of the greater empire, that they would then be able to take back the Ukrainian church?

But a related question is, what about the negotiations? What are you hearing about Medinsky and Slutsky on the Belarus border, Lavrov in Turkey? Do you think that the Russians are bringing good faith to the table? Or do you think that they have-- we know that Medinsky has called Ukraine a "historic phantom." And he has-- Medinsky, in particular-- has said that Ukraine is not a state, and that empire is the glory-- is the destiny-- of Russia, to be an empire.

So what do you think? Are you hearing anything from your journalist colleagues about the possibility of negotiations operating in good faith? Is there anyone else who could negotiate? Are there any glimmers of hope there?

JOSHUA YAFFA: So I think that the personalities involved in negotiations, frankly, are not that determinative because, especially on the Moscow, on the Russian side, this really is the war driven by one man and will be the war ended by one man. And whoever is on the ground in Belarus-- or even Lavrov, the foreign minister, someone with nominally a great deal of authority, one would think-- all these people, essentially, are powerless emissaries who can only act or not act with the approval of one man, Putin.

So I think if and when the calculus for Putin changes, then we'll see some movement on the ground in negotiations. But I don't think it depends on whether it's Medinsky or someone else in that chair. And just to repeat what I've said earlier, is that I think there will be a point, and maybe we've already reached it, when Putin understands that Plan A didn't work.

Plan B of moving to flatten and terrorize Ukrainian citizens and Ukrainian cities to try and force the political leadership to make a deal so as to stop the wanton destruction of the country and its people-- I don't think that, frankly, Putin has sort of reached the end of that strategy. I don't think that he sees any reason to stop that just yet. I think there may be still some utility, however awful and immoral that is, in that strategy for him.

And so I don't-- I wouldn't expect in the coming days for there suddenly to be a grand bargain in which Russia calls off its onslaught because-- for many reasons. But one of them is that there's just this classical imperative in any war that before negotiations, before an agreement, both sides have the kind of imperative, or have every reason to try and push as hard as they can to try and secure gains on the ground.

And I think that's what Russia is doing. And I don't think that those gains have been such to where Putin could say, OK, that's enough, I can call that victory. On the Ukrainian side, there is a fair bit of movement we've seen on the part of Zelenskyy and his officials in talking about things like neutrality, being willing to come up with some kind of formulation, TBD, what that would sound like, a rejection in some form of NATO aspirations.
That's trickier because that is embedded in the country's constitution. Zelenskyy can't just snap his fingers and promise Ukraine won't join NATO because the constitution calls on it to do so. But you see a willingness on the part of Zelenskyy, and those he sent to Belarus to negotiate on his behalf, to try and find some formulations around things like neutrality, and NATO, and so on.

I think what's going to be more difficult is the territorial question. I don't know how, politically, Zelenskyy could, say, acquiesce on Crimea recognition, even on Donetsk and Luhansk, let alone the territory, at least for right now, in the South and East that Russia has nominally taken over. I can't see Zelenskyy giving up Kherson, for example. That just doesn't seem like a realistic concession to expect from him at this point.

So I think there's a lot of daylight still on the territorial questions which would suggest that the trauma, and horror, and violence of the war will continue.

CAROL SAIVETZ: All right. We have a bunch of different questions and I'm trying to figure out how to prioritize them. One is the whole question of the role that NATO expansion played in Putin's calculation, or in Putin's irritation at Ukraine. Somebody asked about John Mearsheimer, whose work has suddenly been highlighted in The New York Times, and elsewhere recently, having said in 2014 that it was all our fault, et cetera.

Another question that's probably related to that, and what you just mentioned, is what's the outcome here? What does neutrality mean? Does it mean that Ukraine is demilitarized, not armed? What kinds of guarantees should we expect, should Ukrainians expect from the West to secure their sovereignty, et cetera, regardless of what the actual territorial compromise is, provided there actually are?

JOSHUA YAFFA: Right. I've come to think, and this is just my very subjective take-- I haven't written this in an article and probably won't because I'm not so convinced of it myself, but it's just a hunch rather than something I want to stake my reputation on-- but the first weeks of this war, and really going back to this important historical speech of Putin's, infamous, I think instantly infamous, speech on the 21st of February, this hour-long rant against Ukraine made me convinced that this isn't really about NATO.

This isn't about security architecture in Europe. This isn't about missile defense in Poland and Romania. This isn't about the Baltics joining a Western-led security bloc. This is about Putin's kind of dark, conspiratorial obsessions about Ukraine, and the kind of proper, in quotes, role that Ukraine should occupy vis a vis Russia, and the nature of that relationship, and the way-- the kind of ahistorical, in Putin's understanding, form that relationship has taken in recent years, that Ukraine has been violating, as it were, the just and proper role that it should play as Russia's neighbor.

And it's incumbent on Russia to fix this historical mistake. And again, this is me sort of parroting Putin's language here. But I think, or rather I've become convinced, that this really is about Ukraine and Putin's, as I've mentioned now a few times, really kind of conspiratorial, dark fantasies about Ukraine and its history, or lack thereof of history. And it's less about these sorts of security issues, and security arrangements, and blocs that have come up in the '90s and 2000s that certainly irritate Putin.

I don't mean to downplay the degree to which something like NATO expansion has played to Putin's darkest fears and fantasies, and perhaps was an additional trigger. But I don't think that's the heart of the question here. I think the heart of the question really is about controlling Ukraine, something that Putin seems to be convinced is kind of Russia's historical birthright, and the kind of correct historical form for that relationship to take.
As to getting into more details about the nature of negotiated settlements, it's hard for me to say. It's hard for me to speculate. I don't know. I haven't done a lot of reporting on that. My reporting in Ukraine over the past month, especially in the first two weeks of the war, and this piece that I just published today in The New Yorker, is really about what war has looked like and felt like for the people of Ukraine, people whose lives were upended overnight and found themselves living in the middle of a war zone.

And what is that like whether you are the victim of a missile attack or someone who worked making-- one character comes to mind. Someone who worked for a company that made agricultural equipment, who joined the territorial defense forces, and is now patrolling his neighborhood with an AK-47. Those are the kinds of people I spent my time with in Ukraine rather than focusing on the big level, political picture.

So here, I only know what I read, just like everybody else. But I think that Ukraine, and maybe even Russia, is open to a degree of flexibility on things like the neutrality question. How would Ukraine security and sovereignty be guaranteed? What will the exact formulation regarding NATO be?

I do think that both sides are-- they're actually willing to test out, and maybe even agree to, different formulations. It's the territorial question where I think the positions are just much harder and more firm on both sides, right? Like, Crimea-- I don't see any formulation that both sides could accept for the Crimea, for example, or Donetsk and Luhansk, or these territories in the South.

So yeah, I don't repeat myself at too much length here. But I think that the neutrality stuff, the NATO stuff, the kind of where does Ukraine fit into European security architecture-- I think that the two sides could find some language that works for everybody. But that's not going to be the issue. That's not the sticking point. It's the other stuff.

ELIZABETH WOOD: All right. We should probably start to wrap up because we know you've been exhausted in the war zone and all. But I do want to ask about, what did you see on the ground about humanitarian aid? And then one of my students has asked, what should, if people in the US want to help Ukraine, what should they be advocating for vis a vis the US government? Do you have thoughts on what the US should, could be doing?

There was another question about what Biden has and has not done, I don't know if we want to go there. But what are you seeing about the humanitarian question? Have you seen humanitarian work being done? Do you have a comment on that? And do you have a thought on should US citizens be lobbying the US government to do anything particularly?

JOSHUA YAFFA: Right, I haven't--

ELIZABETH WOOD: Or US companies?

JOSHUA YAFFA: Right. I was really impressed with the degree, and speed, and scale of the self-organized humanitarian effort in Ukraine. That's part of the story of society coming together, unifying, being really galvanized by the invasion, for this article in The New Yorker. I spent time with a number of volunteers, including one guy in Kyiv who turned his really stylish cafe into a kind of mass production food distribution facility for territorial defense units, making 10,000 lunches a day from his sort of hipster cafe in Kyiv.
And that's just being repeated all over the place, I mean, 10,000, 100,000 times over. And that's a really typical, in a way, story for Ukraine these days. I mean, that's the, I guess, inspiring part of the war, you could say. But that's sort of no match for something like the wholesale destruction of a city like Mariupol, the blockade of Mariupol, with Mariupol specifically under this blockade for more than a week, with no power, with no heat, so no ability for food or medicines to get in.

Whatever sort of self-organized grassroots humanitarian efforts are taking place elsewhere in the country, if the Russian military is bombing and shelling the city to the point of oblivion and not letting any aid get in, all of that is a bit moot, unfortunately. So I'd say that the picture is two-sided, this picture of a country really coming together.

And everywhere I've gone-- I went to another volunteer donation center in Lviv that was just a high school-- or a school gym, or a school auditorium rather, excuse me-- just piled to the rafters, I mean, you could barely walk. There was just so much stuff that people had donated-- clothes, food, medical supplies.

Some of it was going to families that had arrived in Lviv in Western Ukraine from elsewhere, and were picking up goods for themselves and their families upon reaching this new, unfamiliar city. Some of it was going in the opposite direction to army units and territorial defense units on the front lines. And just a huge amount of material coming in, being donated, going out to people in need. And again, that's just a story that's being repeated all over the country. But that's not enough in a case of a place like Mariupol or Kharkiv that's being systematically destroyed by Russian artillery and bombing.

As to the question of what people can do, I will-- I don't want to totally disappoint, but at the same time, I don't, frankly, have a lot of clear policy ideas of my own. One, because I think it's just a really difficult policy problem for the US to solve. And I don't think there is, like, a US-led solution here. The other is a journalistic inclination to kind of fall back to reportorial practice rather than sort of policymaker practice.

What Ukrainians want, and this is not my-- I'm not endorsing this message, but I am passing it along because you hear it so regularly in Ukraine-- is weapons. I mean, there's just an unambiguous desire not just among political types, not just people in the Zelenskyy administration, I mean people you meet at the supermarket, which still work in Kyiv, people you meet on the street.

Everywhere you might run into people, they want a no-fly zone, they want advanced anti-aircraft missiles, they want more fighter jets. There was this deal that fell through in which Poland was going to give Ukraine fighter jets, and then the United States was supposed to replenish Poland's supply of fighter jets. That deal fell through.

But that's what you hear from Ukrainians. That's above my pay grade to comment on, what's prudent in terms of US foreign policy. But it would be-- I'd be remiss in suggesting that what Ukrainians want from the US is packages of Cup of Noodles. No. They want weapons. And I think that creates a real conundrum for the Biden administration.

It'd be one thing if what Ukraine was asking for was medical gauze and canned soup. But that's not what they're asking for, right? They're asking for serious, heavy, advanced weaponry. And I think that has created a real political conundrum for the US and NATO as a whole.
CAROL SAVETZ: All right. Thank you so much. We probably have 20 more questions and could keep you for another two hours, but I know you're exhausted. We really appreciate your taking the time out of all of this to answer our questions and to tell us about your experiences in Ukraine.

Elizabeth, I don't know if you or I are supposed to be doing this. But our next event is in a month. And it's called "The Soviet Collapse Reconsidered." And it'll be by Vlad Zubok, who is a scholar who's worked in the Russian archives, and met and interviewed all the Gorbachev people to talk about why the Soviet Union fell apart.

And of course, in light of the war in Ukraine, I think it'll be even more interesting. So Josh, thank you. Let me thank Michelle English and Laura Kerwin for doing all the technological stuff behind the scenes. And Josh, again, let me thank you.

I know I bugged you last fall-- please come, please come, and everything. And who knew? But this has really been a wonderful experience. And thank you for taking time for us.

JOSHUA YAFFA: Thank you. It was my pleasure. Happy to be with everyone today.

ELIZABETH WOOD: Thank you so much, Josh. And thanks to everyone for coming. I mean, these are obviously key questions. And thank you, Josh, for being on the ground. Best of luck to you.

CAROL SAVETZ: Stay safe.

JOSHUA YAFFA: Thank you.

CAROL SAVETZ: All right.

[MUSIC PLAYING]