

Gaslit Nation Transcript

21 December 2022

“On Tyranny Revisited: The Timothy Snyder Interview”

<https://www.patreon.com/posts/on-tyranny-75883548>

[intro - theme music]

Sarah Kendzior (00:10):

I'm Sarah Kendzior, the author of the bestsellers, *The View from Flyover Country*, and *Hiding In Plain Sight* and of the book, *They Knew: How a Culture of Conspiracy Keeps America Complacent*, which is out now.

Andrea Chalupa (00:23):

I'm Andrea Chalupa, a journalist and filmmaker and the writer and producer of the journalistic thriller, *Mr. Jones*, about Stalin's genocide famine in Ukraine, a film that was made possible by today's guest, the great Timothy Snyder, who is friends with Agnieszka Holland, the director. I met Agnieszka through him. Also, he was the historical advisor, one of many, but one of the most rock-like [laughs] ones on the production. Tim Snyder, who needs no introduction, but we'll give him one anyway. He is the Richard C. Levin—

Sarah Kendzior (00:58):

Andrea... We gotta introduce the show.

Andrea Chalupa (01:00):

Oh, and we have a show called *Gaslit Nation*...

Sarah Kendzior (01:04):

[laughs] Which is a podcast covering corruption in the United States and rising autocracy around the world.

Andrea Chalupa (01:08):

It's great. So Tim Snyder is a professor of history at Yale University and a permanent fellow at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna. He speaks 5 and reads 10 European languages. Some of his bestselling books include *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America*, and now his bestselling pocket guide on resistance to fascism, *On Tyranny*, has been expanded into a new audio edition that includes 20 new lessons from Russia's war in Ukraine, available now. Professor Snyder also went viral this year by putting his lecture series on Ukraine on YouTube, and it's now available as a podcast series on Apple and Spotify, so curl up this holiday season by the fire and check that out. We'll have links in the show notes. Welcome, once again, to *Gaslit Nation*.

Tim Snyder (01:57):

I'm very glad to be with both of you.

Andrea Chalupa (01:59):

Well, we're thrilled. You're our first three-time guest. Sarah and I have a lot to get out of our system today with you. It's sort of like *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure* where you're our Rufus.

Sarah Kendzior (02:08):

[laughs]. This reference is gonna go over Tim Snyder's head, but that's fine, maybe it speak well to—

Tim Snyder (02:11):

No, no, no. That was generationally inevitable that I would get that one. No, I'm with you.

Andrea Chalupa (02:17):

So you visited Ukraine this year. What was that trip like and what was it like meeting with President Zelensky?

Tim Snyder (02:23):

It was terrific. It was really good. I mean, for me, it was something that I felt like I had to do. I don't like talking about and writing about places where I haven't been, and I hadn't been to Ukraine during the war, so it was important for me to go there during the war. It was important for me to catch up with my friends, all of whom had things that they needed to talk about. The wonderful thing about President Zelensky is that he's able to talk. You know, there's none of this, like, having to show how important he is. We were in the middle of a war, in the middle of a counter offensive and in the Kharkiv region at the time, which was going very well. And yet he was perfectly capable of pivoting and talking about the things that I wanted to talk about, which was sort of a deeper reflection on some of the things that he'd said about freedom, which is something which is very much on my mind.

Tim Snyder (03:09):

So it was wonderful and it was special, but at the same time, it was very—and it's odd to say, but at the same time—it was very normal. I felt like he was a very easy person to talk to and had an awful lot to say, but was also a very good listener. He's a very capable, intelligent man; capable of a lot of different things.

Sarah Kendzior:

What is his conception of freedom?

Tim Snyder:

That's what we were working on. I was trying to expand on a couple of interesting things which he had said. One of them is that freedom and security go together. So when he talks about liberating Ukrainian villages, he makes a point of saying that we're restoring freedom and security at the same time. And that's an important point because in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, we're generally asked to, you know, accept that there's a tragic choice between freedom and security.

Tim Snyder (03:51):

And what falls from that practically and politically is that then we're asked regularly to give our freedom for security. And maybe sometimes that trade-off is real, but I think most of the time it's actually false. I think most of the time security and freedom actually go together. So I talked to him about that and he said in so many words, the deprivation of security is unfreedom and the deprivation of freedom is insecurity. So for him, he has these ideas very closely connected in his mind, and I think he's right.

Another thing I wanted to tease out, which we talked about, was how being a free person over the course of a life can lead you to situations where you feel like you don't have a choice. And obviously, what I had in mind was February of this year when he decided to stay in Kyiv.

Tim Snyder (04:32):

And what he said about that was, "I wouldn't have respected myself if I had gone." So in some sense, he didn't have a choice. And this is something which I find interesting about freedom, namely that you make free choices over the course of a life, and that's how you become who you are. And that's that thing which you call character. And then at some times, at some moments—special moments—that thing called character means that you really have to do one thing rather than another if you wanna be yourself. So those are the two ideas of freedom, which I had seen in his words and his deeds, which we talked through.

Andrea Chalupa (05:01):

Is Russia's war in Ukraine a genocide? And if so, in what ways?

Tim Snyder (05:05):

Yes, and in many ways. Number one, it's a genocide in that it fulfills all of the acts that are specified in the 1948 convention. So there are five things that can happen that would constitute genocide in the normal sense and every one of those five things that stipulated is met by Russian activity. I mean, the one which gets overlooked a lot is number five, which is the deportation of children with the attempt of assimilating them. Everyone, you know, we remember the killing of populations and so on, but the Russians keep boasting about deporting Ukrainian children to assimilate them. So there's that. You know, there's the mass deportations, there's the filtration camps, there's the murder of local elites, and all those things are genocide according to practice. But the interesting thing about this genocide is that the intention is so clear.

Tim Snyder (06:02):

So usually the hard part in prosecuting genocide is not the actions, but proving the intent. And what's unusual in this case is that the Russians keep saying over and over again, essentially in so many words, that they mean to commit genocide. And I think that kind of puts everyone in the West in an embarrassing position because our default is, "Well, they do terrible things, but how do we prove intent?" And this time, basically the Russians are overwhelming us with the evidence of intent as they do so often; the basic idea being that if you give them so much, they'll be overwhelmed by it. They'll be bowled over, they don't know what to do. But anyway, the short answer to the question is, yes.

Andrea Chalupa (06:38):

Putin very much started this war, but if Putin dies tomorrow, is the war over? How much is Putin a product of, I guess a genocidal system, where it's okay to commit genocide out in the open, that may very well outlast him?

Tim Snyder (06:52):

I'm glad you mentioned the film because in my view... You know, and you actually overstate my role in it, which is kind, but that was Andrea's film. And you did a wonderful, wonderful job. But one of the problems is the lack of confrontation with history. This may seem like an abstruse historian's point, but I think it's really important. The characteristic of the Putin regime is not dealing with the past, but rather seeking out all the sensitive moments in the past and erasing them, or distorting them, or coming up

with an official mythology about them. So Holodomor, famine of 1932-1933, there's an official position which is that everybody suffered, it was just administrative problems, *and* if Ukrainians complain, that just means that they're Russophobes and whiners and outsiders who deserve abuse. Likewise, with the alliance with Nazi Germany, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939 to 1941, that whole period is legally taboo.

Tim Snyder (07:51):

It's a criminal offense to speak about it in Russia today. And this whole attitude towards history, which is where "we are always innocent and anyone who points out that perhaps maybe not, perhaps history is a little more complicated. They're Russophobes, they're enemies, they're out to get us." That whole attitude gets crystallized in Putin's July, 2021 long and really tedious and ludicrous essay about the Russian-Ukrainian past in which he says that basically, "Ukraine has never existed; if it existed, it was the result of outside actors; one of the outside actors was us, Russia, therefore, we have the authority to say whether Ukraine exists or not in any way we want, including military." Now, the reason I stress this is because this is about Putin, but it's also not about Putin. It's clear that Putin has a fixation on Ukraine. It's clear that as he's aged, he's become more and more interested in Russian fascist ideas.

Tim Snyder (08:43):

And in Russian historical mythology. That's all perfectly clear. But this kind of thing where you give people a sense of pride because they're an empire and you give them the idea that whatever an empire does, it's innocent because it's based upon some true and higher understanding of history: that, of course, is contagious and it, in many forms, is quite popular in Russian society. If Putin dies tomorrow or leaves power, the work could go in many different ways, but people would be very confused if it were to end right away, because right now, as I see it anyway, the real question is not, "What is Ukraine?" I think the Ukrainians have answered that a thousand times over. The real question is, "What is Russia besides anti Ukraine?" And what this war has done is it's basically cleared out the supply of possible definitions of Russia, leaving Russia as a kind of anti Ukraine.

Tim Snyder (09:32):

And so if Putin dies tomorrow, it's gonna be very difficult for anyone to explain what is going on if we're not then fighting a war in Ukraine. One of the people who's most interested in the war in Ukraine is Yevgeny Prigozhin, the guy who brought us the Internet Research Agency and helped bring Donald Trump to power, who is in charge of a mercenary firm called Wagner, which is called Wagner because Prigo thinks that Wagner was Hitler's favorite opera composer, which gives you an idea of the political orientation of the group. For him, this war is one long advertisement. He wants the war to go on because it makes him a kind of celebrity. So he doesn't, you know... It's unpredictable what happens if Putin dies but my larger point is that the war is a fulfillment of a certain kind of Russian myth of self and now there's at least one commercial interest which would like that war to continue.

Sarah Kendzior (10:23):

I have a question about the erasure of history because I feel like it's easier now to erase history than before. It's easier now in the digital era. And when you talk about Putin and others' straightforwardly admitting their intent to commit genocide, I wonder if one of the reasons for that sense of impunity is because they know that they can rewrite history, that there are tools and technology available for all of the evidence to be more easily destroyed. And we're also witnessing this in the West, you know, with social media monopolies and takeovers and so forth. I'm just curious about your thoughts on this and how Russia's war on Ukraine will be remembered in the future—the current ongoing war—given that Andrea and many others and you had to dig up the evidence of the Holodomor and of Stalin's genocide in the 1930s because that was so effectively buried in a different era.

Tim Snyder (11:17):

Yeah, I think that's an absolutely brilliant point. One of the reasons why it's so dangerous for the past to be erased is the people who are doing the erasing think that they can do the same thing in the present. I think you're absolutely right and the nature... And as a historian, I really take your point. We love documents. Documents have a way of not getting destroyed. They have a way of existing in duplicate and triplicate. They have a way of existing in the archive in Vilnius or Kyiv, even if you can't get to Moscow and so on and so forth. Whereas, ironically or unexpectedly to many people, starting in the '90s as things started to get electronic, it's gonna be much harder for historians to find those documents, the things that they need. I mean, apart from anything else, people don't express themselves as clearly anymore.

Tim Snyder (12:04):

It's very easy to be cryptic over text. Whereas there used to be, you know, not to sound too nostalgic, but there used to be memos, you know? There used to be records of conversations which one could eventually find and then try to make sense of a historical moment. So I think you're absolutely right about the intention of the person erasing and I think you're right about the existence of the text. That said—and again, you suggest this already in your question, too—civil society on the other side can play a particular role in trying to document a war or an atrocity. So in the Holocaust or in the Holodomor, it was quite difficult for the victims to chronicle. They didn't have the technologies which would allow them to easily chronicle. There are diaries of the Holocaust but there aren't really that many.

Tim Snyder (12:53):

There are survivor's testimonies, of course, but it wasn't easy to chronicle while it was happening. Holodomor: extraordinarily difficult to chronicle while it was happening and that's why Gareth Jones, the subject of Andrea's movie, is so important. But now it's turned around where the Ukrainians during this war are able to—and have organized themselves very well in order to be able to—document these atrocities as they're happening across all kinds of dimensions. And in that way, I think technology is helping so long as the technology is organized the right way. If I can make a little plug here, you mentioned the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna. We have a project there called “Documenting Ukraine” where we are funding Ukrainians in Ukraine to do just this, to do precisely this; to make sure that there is a record and that it's organized in some way so that it can be permanent afterwards. So from the victim's side, if you can organize and if you have—as Ukraine does, fortunately—a state and a civil society, you can turn the tables on this and create a huge basis of evidence for future historians or for future trials.

Andrea Chalupa (14:02):

One thing that this war has driven to the surface is frustration from Ukrainians over the Russian opposition, or what they see as a lack thereof. Recently, a TV broadcaster was fired at the Russian opposition online TV network that broadcasts from Latvia TV Rain, for fundraising for Russian soldiers in Ukraine. This is seen as a larger problem, that there's an element in the Russian opposition that's anti Putin but hasn't come to terms with Russia's own genocidal history, especially in regards to Ukraine. There's that saying that “the Russian liberal stops where Ukraine starts.” What are your thoughts on this?

Tim Snyder (14:40):

So, I'm gonna try to answer this on a couple levels. One level is to compare the recent history of Russia and Ukraine. I think especially looking back from 2022, we can see some really important turning points where, as it were, to steal from A.J.P. Taylor: History did turn on the Ukraine side, but it didn't turn on the Russian side. So for me, those critical points would be the first five years of the 21st century where, in the succession from Yeltsin to Putin, Russian democracy—which was already deeply flawed—but

Russian democracy dies because you have one leader choosing his successor, anointing his successor, and that successor then riding to power on the basis of a televised militarism in Chechnya. And I think that was close to fatal right there, whereas four years after that, in Ukraine there was an attempt to fake an election where this new Russian president, Putin, is actually concerned to have work.

Tim Snyder (15:48):

There's an attempt to fake an election, and that attempt to fake election is stopped by popular resistance by civil society in late 2004 in what was called then the Orange Revolution. And so you do then have a normal succession where someone is trying to anoint their successor and they fail, and it's very important that they fail and that someone else gets elected. That someone else, you know, doesn't have to be perfect and wasn't, but that there could be a normal rotation of power. And the second turning point would be Maidan, obviously; the Revolution of Dignity of 2014-2015 where, on the Russian side, Putin is still in power and he's attempting to legitimize his authoritarian state by this foreign adventure. And on the Ukrainian side, you have mass participation of civil society—and this is important—in order to support the rule of law.

Tim Snyder (16:37):

There are many reasons why people are on the street, but according to the polling, the main thing they wanted was a Ukraine that functions according to the rule of law. And those protests succeeded. Ukrainians succeeded in asserting themselves and we see the legacy of those protests in the way that Ukraine is fighting the war now. A lot of the networks and personal acquaintanceships and self-confidence that arose in 2013, 2014, 2015, are what is behind the civil society that allows Ukraine to fight this war so effectively today. In Russia, there isn't a moment like that. In Russia, Putin comes back to power for a second two terms (2010,2012) with resistance, but that resistance fails. So not getting into the comparative difficulty of all of this, Russia and Ukraine are on very different trajectories, basically because, you know, as the Ukrainians see it—and they're not entirely wrong—Russians failed where Ukrainians succeeded.

Tim Snyder (17:32):

And we can get all blase about democracy and Americans often do, but having that basic confidence that your vote is gonna be counted, that you choose your leader, and that that will happen also in the future, and that nobody can stop you, foreign or domestic, that really distinguishes Ukrainians from Russians today. A deeper historical take would be something like this: It is really hard to stop being an empire. It is really hard. And if this were a show about America, we could spend the entire hour and more talking about how it's hard for America to stop being an empire. It's not an easy thing to do. The shortcut, and usually the only way in European history, is that you lose an imperial war. That's what you have to do. I mean, it doesn't sound like a good recipe for the future, but the whole history of European integration and what we now see as the successful European states that have integrated with one another, that's all a post-imperial history, which happens after the Dutch lose their war in Indonesia, or the French lose their war in Southeast Asia and in Algeria, after the Spanish and the Portuguese have to leave Africa and so on and so forth. It's a post-imperial history. All of their liberals—or not all of them, but most of their liberals—were explicit or implicit imperialists until it no longer made any sense. And I think the same will be true with Russia. I'm happy to talk in more detail about how to deal with Russians now, but the fundamental issue is that it's very hard to construct a Russian state, which is liberal in our contemporary sense, so long as Russia is defined in so many ways as an empire. And the way for Russia not to be defined as an empire is for Russia to lose its last imperial war, which is the war going on now with Ukraine. It's obviously important for a whole series of reasons for Ukraine to win this war, including existentially, going back to your question about genocide, but it's very important for Russia—although it

seems odd and ironic—it's very important for Russia to lose this war. I think for Russia to have a decent future, it's very important for Russia to lose this war. Russia can only win by losing.

Andrea Chalupa (19:37):

Yeah because that would then liberate it to finally confront itself and the history, and get the historical truth out. There seems to be, though, this creeping feeling that some European powers are being overly cautious with the support they're giving Ukraine because they wanna get back to business as usual with Russia. What would you say to those who are looking for the slightest opportunity for negotiations with Russia and even a Russian reset?

Tim Snyder (20:02):

Number one, if Europeans are at all serious about having learned from the second World War, which is supposed to be the founding myth of European integration and, in general, of post-war European politics, then it's very hard to see how one can treat contemporary Russia as a normal state with which one can do business. It's revealed itself to be a state that not only has carried out an aggressive war; I mean a war of aggression which is so palpably one-sided in its aggression. Wars are usually controversial. This one is not controversial. But not just a war of aggression, but a war of atrocity and indeed a war of genocide. It is very hard to see how one can make the case that one can now treat this state as a normal partner for business. On the contrary, the behavior of Russia today should call into question the previous 20 years of European engagement with Russia.

Tim Snyder (21:00):

I'm of the view that policymakers in Europe, I mean, putting aside the very easy case of Trump, right? I mean that's just... Trump's just a sitting duck here. But putting aside the very easy case of Trump, European policymakers—particularly policymakers in Berlin—should be reconsidering how their policy choices enabled Russian fascism and enabled this war because even if you're only thinking of economic costs and benefits—which of course you shouldn't, but even if you are—the fact that, you know, your policies which you pursued in the name of economics led to this war ended up having terrible economic costs. So even if you are entirely amoral and don't think about history, it doesn't make any sense economically. And then in terms of negotiation, that issue... I mean, I'm gonna make a super conservative point now. One thing which I've really struggled with as a practicing historian is the weakness of diplomatic and military history.

Tim Snyder (21:55):

I don't mean that the historians we have are weak, I just mean that there are too few of them. And as this war has proceeded, I've been really struck by how well historians of war like Lawrence Freedman in the UK or Phillips O'Brien who works in the UK at St. Andrews, how well they have tracked the war even though they're not area specialists and how poorly basically everyone else has. Why do I make this point? Because I feel like so much of the coverage of this war is driven by the areas where we feel comfortable given our educational backgrounds, which leads a lot of people into discourse studies and psychology which have their role for sure, and I use them both, but a lot of what we end up saying about Putin tends to be about how is he feeling and what can he do and what would make him feel better and what would make him feel worse?

Tim Snyder (22:49):

And I just think that a lot of the time people need to understand the battlefield realities and that Putin's feelings only have a limited significance when you're actually at war with a peer foe that's probably going to defeat you. A fundamental reality of the battlefield is that negotiations—and again, I'm going all

conservative, this is just Clausewitz, right?—that negotiations are a function of the relative relationships of power at a given point in the war. It's not some kind of magical choice, like you say, "Oh, today I like negotiation. Yesterday I liked war, but today I like negotiation." I mean, so often this is presented as though it's one or the other. "Why would you choose war when you can choose negotiation?" But Russia started this war, and whether one can negotiate with Russia depends upon Russia losing this war. So anyone who is in favor of negotiation should be in favor of defeating Russia. It's actually just logically contradictory to think, "Oh, I'm gonna have one and not the other." No. If you want negotiation, that means you arm the Ukrainians as much as you can so they can win the war because that's the only conceivable scenario where there might be something like negotiations with Russia.

Sarah Kendzior (23:55):

So regarding Putin and Trump: Trump was a partner of Putin. This was out in the open. They had a mutually beneficial relationship and in many ways Trump's policies both within the US and abroad generally—his actions towards NATO and other partners—helped clear the road for Putin to reinvade Ukraine in 2022. But I'm curious about why you think Putin waited for... I mean, I'm not saying he waited for Biden, but why he wouldn't have acted earlier while Trump, his partner, was in office versus now when he is dealing with the Biden administration, which is much more sympathetic to Ukraine and willing to help arm Ukraine?

Tim Snyder (24:40):

Yeah, I mean, I wanna emphasize the premise of your question because it's really important for this not to get lost. And you of course were on this extremely, extremely early as people should remember, but Trump came to power owing Putin quite a lot and being quite aware of that. Aside and apart from the fact that Trump admires actual dictators; as a wannabe dictator, he admired actual dictators. And then just emphasize your point about NATO. I mean we know a great deal now about the kinds of things Trump was saying at the end of his first term and they involved, for example, pulling the United States out of NATO, which leads me to the answer to your question. I think that Putin's calculus was very likely that in a second Trump administration a war wouldn't actually be necessary because Ukraine could just be taken; the US would encourage it or the US would do nothing, or the US would just cause a lot of confusion about it.

Tim Snyder (25:38):

And if you look at the kinds of things that Trump or members of the Trump family now say, that seems like quite irrational calculation; that all that would've happened is that people would've picked up a lot of fuss about how both countries are corrupt and it's not really our affair and maybe it's the Ukrainian's fault and so on. The stuff which now flourishes on the American far right would have been mainstream with a Trump in the White House and there wouldn't have been any kind of reaction. So I think it's likely that he thought with a second Trump administration they'll just be able to waltz in, you know, with some kind of explicit or implicit deal with the Americans. I think that's the explanation. The more Trump there was gonna be, the better it was gonna be for Russia. A second Trump term—and this also applies to the future, although I don't think that's gonna happen—but a second Trump term was just gonna make things better and better for Russia vis-a-vis Ukraine, whereas calculating it without Trump is a little bit different. Calculating it without Trump, you think, "Okay, well in the overall correlation of forces, maybe it's better for me to act now rather than later on."

Sarah Kendzior (26:42):

Why do you think Putin assumed that there would be a second Trump term? Because it seems like, you know, that that was what you were implying; that he kind of thought it was in the bag and therefore he could bide at his time and let these institutions crumble, making it easier for him to just simply waltz in and take Ukraine instead of having to wage warfare, which he's had to do under Biden. Just seems like there's kind of a risk calculated in there during the time period of Trump's first term that Trump would simply remain, you know, that there was no way he could possibly lose. That seems like quite a big gamble on his part.

Tim Snyder (27:17):

I mean, we're now speculating a little bit, but I think it's a calculation about the overall correlation of forces that in general for Russia, in general, things are going badly, but the Trump administration creates a special moment where Russian power gets magnified and therefore if you can, take advantage of that. And remember, a second Trump administration—if there had been one—would've been an authoritarian regime illegitimately in power, having overturned the American Constitution. I mean, just [laughs], like, as a reminder. That's what almost happened in January, 2021. And in that situation, where we would've been, you know, basically in horrible civil strife the entire time, I think the cakewalk scenario in Ukraine is still not plausible because it depends on miscalculation about Ukraine not existing. But you can see how they might be thinking that; that, you know, the Trump administration, America out of NATO, Americans fighting amongst themselves and so on. But once you don't have that, then you fall back on plan B. But again, I think, Sarah, we should be clear now that we don't have very much evidentiary basis to be considering this. I'm just kind of running through the logic as I see it.

Sarah Kendzior (28:23):

Yeah, absolutely.

Andrea Chalupa (28:25):

So we're heading into winter. I've read reports that Ukraine wants to keep going. Ukraine has the initiative in the war, Russians are on the run, winter's a good time because the earth is frozen solid and they wanna really push ahead and liberate more areas because in March, April, the rains come and everything becomes muck and mud and it's harder to obviously fight in. What should elected officials be doing to support Ukraine now in this critical window of time? What should we as individuals be doing to lend our part to help Ukraine?

Tim Snyder (29:00):

In terms of how we think about this war, the most important thing for us and for our elected officials to remember is that someone's gonna win and someone's gonna lose. There aren't these magical outcomes. I think every time someone uses the word stalemate, they should like, give me a dime. Every time someone uses the word frozen conflict, they should give me a quarter. There's this kind of wishful thinking that this can just kind of fade, but if it's not gonna fade. Someone's gonna win and someone's gonna lose and it's really very important to be thinking about it that way because then you have to decide, okay, which side do I wanna be on? Who do I want to win? Because that depends, in some considerable measure, on us. We in the Test, we in the United States, are co-responsible for how this turns out.

Tim Snyder(29:46):

And if we get ourselves caught in these manners of thinking—which the Russians would really, really like us to do—that it's all a stalemate, it's all very complicated, who knows? Let's move on to other things—if

we do that, then we're co-responsible for the Ukrainians losing, which would be terrible for a whole number of reasons; terrible for democracy, terrible for world food supply, terrible for the precedent it sets, terrible for the euphoria that would ensue among tyrants at home and abroad and so on. But in terms of the practice of that, what does it mean for Ukraine to win? If you're the United States, it's very important for another big omnibus package of aid for Ukraine to be passed by this Congress. I mean, I don't wanna sound hyperbolic, but I think an awful lot depends on that. I think if another big package passes before the next Congress, the Ukrainians are gonna do very well in the spring and far fewer Ukrainians are going to die over the course of the winter.

Tim Snyder (30:43):

I think it's really important that that happens now. And if you're putting pressure on your elected officials, you should be asking them to make sure that this omnibus package, which is under discussion now, gets passed under this congress, this month, now as soon as possible. In terms of the winter, the Ukrainians are being—you asked earlier about genocide—the latest part of this is the Russian attempt to cut Ukrainians off from water and power, which is just such an atrocity. I mean, every morning when I wake up and, you know, go for a run or whatever and then come back and turn the light on and take a shower, I think about, “Okay, what's life like when I can't turn the lights on and there's no water? What is that like?” And, you know, more than 10 million Ukrainians are cut off from power because the Russians are trying to cut them off.

Tim Snyder (31:29):

Ukrainians have to get through this, and we can help them with that. We can help with supplying generators as private individuals. We can help... Well, another plug now. So, the Ukrainian president has a platform called United 24 where I have a campaign to raise funds for anti-drone defense. That is the kind of thing which we can do as individuals. We can contribute money that way or some other way to anti-drone defense or to humanitarian aid through organizations like Razom. We can all do that as private individuals. I mean, my basic take is that Ukrainians are gonna get through this winter. We can do what we can to help them get through this winter. We need to make sure that they have long range weapons and air defense and ideally also tanks and aircraft so that they can beat the Russians during the few weeks that they can fight this winter. And finally, during the spring after the rain, there's a decent chance that this war can come to an end with Ukrainian victory in the first part of next year. But I think that really largely depends upon choices that Americans and others make these next few weeks.

Sarah Kendzior (32:31):

About that. We just had our election in which the Republicans re-took the House, which I'm guessing is one of the reasons that you're emphasizing the need to put this aid package for Ukraine now. And we've also had two years of institutional erosion following the bulldozing of institutions by Trump. We've had an unpunished coup. We've had a large number of individuals tied to the Kremlin, working with the Kremlin, who also were aiding Trump, simply walking around unpunished and still wreaking havoc; people like Roger Stone and Paul Manafort and so forth. Just wondering how you see the connection of the integrity of democracy in the United States, how is that related to the prospect of justice and sovereignty in Ukraine, or for that matter, vice versa?

Tim Snyder (33:26):

Thanks for that. For me, you know, as you know, it's the same question and it's been the same question basically for a decade. You mentioned Manafort, and as you well know, Manafort was in Ukraine pitching the Republican southern strategy to Viktor Yanukovich: Make everything about culture, punish them on cultural issues. It was largely American advice which led to this idea that Ukraine is somehow divided by

language and there are culture wars in Ukraine. I mean, that was paid American political advice coming from Paul Manafort, which arises from the Republican southern strategy, which arises from the opposition to civil rights and giving African Americans the vote. It's really all one story. And Manafort then becomes Trump's campaign advisor to make it all literal and clear and plain for us. The very same people in Russia who created chaos around Maidan in Ukraine in 2014, who brought us the stories about how it was a coup or it was Nazis... All this nonsense. Or gays or gay Nazis.

Tim Snyder (34:28):

The very same people, the very same institutions were the ones who were involved with supporting the Trump candidacy in 2016 using the same techniques; the same techniques of appealing to people's exposed vulnerabilities on social media. It is really all one issue. So the people who are addicted to or profit from or just simply enjoy that kind of politics, where it's all about power, it's all about the big oligarch at the center, it's all about just, you know, having nihilistic thrills of being on the right side of power, that's an international network of people that has then nothing to do with America or for that matter it has nothing to do with Russia in the sense of any kind of national interest in Russia. It's empty of values entirely. It's a cynicism and nihilism which is entirely inconsistent with democracy. So yeah, it worries me a lot that these people are still walking around. There's a matter of American rule of law, which has to be asserted and has only been asserted to a limited degree. But there's also the larger question of whether democracies—even big democracies like ours—can recognize and deal with the larger international threat which is posed by oligarchy and dark money and the possibilities that are made available by social media.

Sarah Kendzior (35:50):

I mean, on that note, Biden ran on a platform of accountability, of anti kleptocracy, and a lot of people had the expectation, especially after Russia reinvaded Ukraine, that this broader oligarch mafioso dark money network would be gutted, that the sanctions on oligarchs and so forth would benefit democracy in the United States because these individuals would not have the power they had. It would sort of shift the moral framework that you were referring to and lay the corruption out plain. But this DOJ and generally this Congress has been reluctant to pursue those aims, even though it seems to be in America's own self-interest, our own survival to pursue those aims. Why do you think that they've been so timid?

Tim Snyder (36:39):

First of all, before we move into the critique, I'm just gonna point out that I think that the Biden administration has been excellent on Ukraine and we just shouldn't take that for granted. I mean, I spend my time, you know, disagreeing with them because I think they were too slow—and still are too slow—to get to the idea of victory. I think they've been way too cautious. They've invented various taboos like “Ukraine shouldn't be striking in Russia”, which is a weird rule in war. And the Russians don't even, I guess it's about escalation, but the Russians don't even know we're doing that nor do they even care. They just think it's weird. You can't find Russian soldiers or officers who think, “Oh yes, the Americans aren't striking, the Americans aren't giving Ukrainians weapons of this and this range, and therefore...” No, they say they're fighting us anyway and they don't care whether Ukrainians strike across their borders.

Tim Snyder (37:26):

They just deny it if it happens. I spend all my time trying to point out that we have the capability in this war faster. But that said, the Biden administration approached this war has been really sound, fundamentally. I don't wanna take that for granted. And I do think the fact that the Biden administration has been able to make the argument that this war is about democracy in the fundamental sense of

people being able to choose their leaders and also in another fundamental sense of people willing to take risks to defend what is fundamentally an ethical position—after all, democracy's fundamentally an ethical position—I think they've done a really good job. And I think that has had positive feedback loops inside American society. So before we go into that question, Sarah, I just wanna say that like, it could have been much, much, much worse.

Sarah Kendzior (38:10):

Oh, we are very aware. [laughs] It could have been and can be much, much worse. So yes, we're all in agreement there.

Andrea Chalupa:

Agree.

Tim Snyder (38:16):

Yeah, much, much worse is your bread and butter. I know. For the purpose of our conversation, I just wanted to get that out. I think it's really important. And then beyond that, I fundamentally agree with you and I've always agreed with you. I am not close enough to this to know what people's political calculations are and I don't wanna speculate. I think a case can be made either way about the politics of it; whether it hurts the Democrats, helps the Democrats. But fundamentally, I think there's an existential issue here for the Republic, which is that no one is beyond the law. And once you start creating this gray zone, you're moving into authoritarian land. And authoritarian land exists in people's minds. You know, once you start with this idea that some people are holy, there is a sacred space around some people, they can't really be touched no matter what they do, no matter what laws they break, no matter how they flaunt it, then you're instructing generations to come.

Tim Snyder (39:08):

You're instructing people in general that that's how this is, that's the way the world actually works. And that moves you a step towards the kind of cynicism—or rather nihilism—that is characteristic, for example, of Russian fake democracy. So I agree with you. I mean, I don't think people should be unduly hasty, but I do think it's really important to do your best to treat American citizens as American citizens and that all the claptrap about special kinds of privilege—and this is one thing, by the way, that the founders were generally pretty clear about—all the claptrap about special kinds of privilege, that's just a step back towards feudalism. It's just a step back towards the kind of system we weren't supposed to have.

Sarah Kendzior (39:48):

Yeah, absolutely, and I feel like there's this strange dichotomy where the majority of Americans, including in states like mine, Missouri, which is now a Republican state, they support the war in Ukraine. I see flags in rural Missouri, Ukrainian flags. And people support it because they're inspired. They see people rising up, they see people refusing to back down against tyranny. But especially, you know, among progressives, there's some confusion about how the Biden administration can see this conflict very clearly—who the aggressor is, who the victim is, the need to help the victim at this time—but isn't necessarily doing the same, at least not as assertively, for its own people, for the American people. And I'm not proposing an either/or situation, I'm proposing a both/and situation in which we strengthen the integrity of democracy here. And I'm just wondering, why is there this split?

Tim Snyder (40:45):

I think “split” is too strong. I mean, Biden did before the midterms make democracy his issue. And he got predictably from *The New York Times* and from all, you know, all of the wise commentators, he got predictably abused for that. And he was told that, you know, people only care about inflation, they only care about the gas tank. And I think that was wrong. I think he was right both in practice and in principle to make that an issue, to give that a shot, before the midterms. I agree with you that it could be more front and center legislatively than it is, but I do think that there has been an overall consistency, at least at the level of principle between foreign and domestic policy. I mean, to go back to the premise of your other question: If we lose in Ukraine—I mean, again, I don't wanna sound hyperbolic—but I think if we lose in Ukraine, we have pretty much lost.

Tim Snyder (41:34):

And the instruments in Ukraine are urgent and rather simple. It's an unusually simple conflict. And where our role is unusually simple, you know, we supply generators, we supply weapons, we help people organize themselves. It's an unusual historical situation where there is a state and there's a civil society and the state and civil society are lined up pretty much in the same way. And all we have to do is plug stuff in. And this goes to the question of the confusion among the progressives because it's unusual to be in that situation. Usually the weaker side doesn't have the civil society and the state that you can just plug into. And this time we do, right? In Syria, that wasn't the case. But in Ukraine, that is the case. And so I guess I wouldn't wanna confuse the relative simplicity of Ukraine with the relative complexity of the US, where civil society isn't all lined up in the same direction, where civil society is divided on the question of what kind of elections we should actually have.

Tim Snyder (42:33):

The fact the states are controlled by Republicans and we have this tradition of gerrymandering and so on makes a lot of things much more complicated. So I agree with the premise of your question completely. I think it should be both. I think it should be both/and. I mean, my argument for Ukraine the entire time has been an argument that Ukrainians are giving us an example that democracy is fundamentally ethical and worth making sacrifices for. And we have to remember that and not be cynical. And when we look at the challenges that we're facing, we shouldn't be thinking, “Oh, we'll never get over that” because whatever challenges we're facing, the Ukrainians are facing much more difficult ones. When the war started, I was confronted by this question that you're asking. I was confronted by it in a pretty direct way because I was teaching last semester in prison and the guys I was teaching—

Andrea Chalupa:

Did you say prison?

Tim Snyder (43:22):

Yeah.

Andrea Chalupa:

Where? Prison where?

Tim Snyder:

In the United States.

Andrea Chalupa:

Wow.

Tim Snyder:

In Connecticut. The guys I was teaching were very interested in the war, partly because they were just interested in what's going on outside. One of them was a veteran and also they knew I knew something about Eastern Europe. And so they ended up kind of becoming, actually they ended up kind of becoming my support group because every week I would come in and at the beginning we'd talk about Ukraine and Russia and what was going on in the war. And so here I was in this institution, which from my point of view anyway, constitutes pretty much the Nader of continuities in American imperial history and American social injustice. And I was really struck by how the prison... I mean, it was a fascinating semester in general, teaching and learning from these students, but how they were able to identify with the Ukrainians as being in the colonial position.

Sarah Kendzior(44:20):

MmHm. <affirmative>

Tim Snyder:

It wasn't their first reaction because their first reaction was, you know, "these are white guys and we're white guys." But as we talked through it, they started making connections to US history and they started being able to see the colonial aspect of the Russian-Ukrainian relationship. And I thought that showed extraordinary generosity on their part; a generosity of intellect and a generosity of spirit. But it also did give me hope that—in the right setup anyway—that we can get the American and the Ukrainian concerns and issues lined up in a way where we can find language to talk about them.

Sarah Kendzior (45:03):

Oh, absolutely. And like I was saying, I hear enthusiastic rhetoric for the Ukrainians, sort of a feeling of hope that yes, even in the worst of circumstances it is still possible to, you know, mount a vigorous fight back. But that makes it all the more important that that fight be supported both materially and also that principles are put to practice on our own side.

Andrea Chalupa (45:26):

Thank you so very much and come back again. Sarah and I love talking to you. It helps me so much and we just need someone else to talk to [laughs].

Sarah Kendzior (45:36):

Absolutely.

Andrea Chalupa (45:37):

Yeah. So thank you, thank you, thank you so very much, Tim.

Sarah Kendzior (45:40):

Yes. Thank you. Really appreciate you answering these questions.

Tim Snyder (45:43):

Yeah, thanks to both of you. You're the best.

[outro - music up and under, roll credits]

Andrea Chalupa:

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