

Gaslit Nation Transcript

20 September 2023

“Are Putin and Trump Winning?”

<https://www.patreon.com/posts/are-putin-and-89537604>

[This is an edited recording of a live event held on September 18th, 2023 at P&T Knitwear in NYC]

[advertisement]

[intro theme music]

Andrea Chalupa (00:41):

Thank you everyone. Welcome to this special live taping of *Gaslit Nation*.

[audience cheers]

Andrea Chalupa (00:48):

Aww, you guys are so nice. Thank you so much. I'm extremely honored and thrilled to be here. Thank you to my dear sister from another mother, Olga Lautman, who is fighting the good fight to a great personal risk for herself, especially for all the cigarettes she smokes. We're gathered here really for an intervention with you, Olga, because we need you to stick around for as long as possible. I'm dead serious. Really serious, Olga. Stop. And then, of course, there's Ruth Ben-Ghiat, the historian who everyone knows and loves, who is so photogenic on MSNBC. When you come on the TV, I stop what I'm doing and I watch. And you're just, like, this soothing voice telling us about how F-ed we all are.

[audience laughs]

Ruth Ben-Ghiat (01:33):

Yeah, that's the brand. I get emails. People say, “You're saying terrifying things, but somehow I feel comforted.” I'm like, “...Okay.”

[audience laughs]

Andrea Chalupa (01:42):

Really. It's like Oprah's Favorite Things coming at me. [audience laughs] And we're here to celebrate the *Gaslit Nation* graphic novel. I have to get this out of the way because that's the excuse we used to come together tonight. And the *Gaslit Nation* graphic novel is called *Dictatorship: It's Easier Than You Think!* Sarah and I wrote it together during the hellfire of the pandemic when we were fighting to warn everyone about the slow moving coup of Trump and his Kremlin Klown Kar that was quickly accelerating—because it's called accelerationism for a reason—into a fast moving coup, right? We even had that pre-coup special that we announced on the show. And that book we wrote to stay grounded, to stay sane. We wrote it in the spirit of *The Colbert Report*, the vintage Colbert show, where you follow this slimy trickster, this attractive Roger Stone meets...

Andrea Chalupa (02:42):

Basically it's like a composite character of all the co-conspirators that have been indicted [laughs]. And he's the guy that, Ruth can tell you, has existed throughout history in helping bring these toxic people—these narcissists, these psychopaths, these dictators—to power. Dictators do not come to power alone. It takes a village of co-conspirators. And so that's what the book is and we are very honored by it, thrilled by it. The illustrator is Kasia Babis who is a brilliant human rights activist in Poland. She was working to bring food to the refugees that Russia and Belarus dumped on the border of Poland. And she is a feminist that has put her own life on the line in fighting for women's rights in Poland against a very Trumpian government there, against their total abortion ban. She's posted photos of herself with blood on her face and other things. That's our illustrator.

Andrea Chalupa (03:39):

So she had a lot to say with this book, just like Sarah and I did. It was very much a time capsule; a diary capturing what we were all living through; that collective horror, that collective grief. And shortly before it went to print, when we were reviewing the final copy, that's when the disinformation was spreading about the Kremlin's total genocide of Ukraine. And I made some last minute changes to fact-check in real time what *Gaslit Nation* listeners were sending me, saying, "Well, what do you have to say about this?" And I was like, "Well, I'll put it in the book." And so it's a document, a living document of this history that we're all sharing in. And so I'm going to get straight to questions because really this is a genuine conversation. I'm a mom in America trying to raise two girls in a society that openly wants to kill them in any way, shape or form.

Andrea Chalupa (04:30):

I don't know what future my girls are heading towards. I put a smile on my face every day to face them bravely and give them the best day ever, just like every parent out there. But I want to know, What am I raising them for? What will they have in the future? I watch these horrible YouTube videos going viral of the incel movement, right? The Andrew Tates out there. I'm like, are you...? That, to me... So, I'm raising strong Nazi hunters. And I want them to be safe. I want them to be expressive. I want them to shine bright and I want them to breathe clean air and vote and hold their wife's hand in public if that's what they feel like doing. And I want them just to live out loud. We all have the right to do that. And so as a mom, as an activist, as an independent journalist, I'm turning genuinely before your eyes, here as we all are together, to these wonderful women, these experts, to help me understand what's going on, what do we do about it? How do I stop feeling like I'm lying to my girls every time I smile at them? So I'm going to turn to you, Ruth. Do you think Trump and Putin are winning? And what do you think will ultimately stop them? Your next book.

Ruth Ben-Ghiat (05:42):

Small question. First, I want to just say how very thrilled I am to see this book done in this format. It's really important that it's telling the story through images as a graphic novel. Also, it captures the kind of... There's this... If you work on these awful people, like, some of the most horrible people who ever lived, you pick up in your research kind of a certain dark humor that people who live with these people, under these people develop to get through. And somehow the graphic novel format adds that. It captures some of that dark humor, which is important not to make light of anything at all, but to reach people because this book is going to reach people who might not read my book, you know? Though they will read a graphic novel. And so I'm so happy that you did this. I know it was a lot of work, but it's incredible.

Andrea Chalupa (06:38):

Thank you so much. That means so much coming from you because *Strongmen* is essential.

Ruth Ben-Ghiat (06:44):

In terms of, “Are they winning?” I actually feel that at the macro level, I'm actually quite hopeful. And this won't happen overnight, but there is a kind of turning away from authoritarianism. A lot of these... Like Russia has been exposed, ravaged, their armed forces, ravaged by corruption. Putin, you know, hundreds of thousands of Russians left. In Turkey, there's just hundreds of thousands of people trying to leave because they see after the earthquake that the government was uncaring and didn't care about them. You have mass protests starting—this is really very important—and the media doesn't cover this as a systemic thing. There are major mass protests all over the world in places that never have mass protests, or they're the biggest protests they've ever had, or they haven't had such a big one for many years, like Iran, China. The Chinese protest, we didn't hear... It was shut down quickly, but 79 universities had protests in China, including Xi Jinping's alma mater.

Ruth Ben-Ghiat (07:58):

The reason I'm hopeful in general is there is a kind of ground swell of activity, also people working who feel existentially threatened by the plunder politics that is in both certain kinds of democracies and authoritarian states. So there's a move, building, that's for a new kind of anti-authoritarian age. In the meantime though, we've got these two F-ers there. And I like to say... I don't like to say it, but every day that Putin is still in the war killing Ukrainians is a victory for Putin. That is undeniably true because it's a genocidal war. But I do think that he has weakened himself, even before the Prigozhin thing. In fact, there's a concept I've developed called autocratic backfire where autocrats who are full of hubris, they don't listen to anybody, they make stupid decisions without proper feedback, and two days after Putin invaded Ukraine, I wrote an MSNBC op-ed saying, “This isn't going to go well.” And I'm not a Russia specialist like Olga or you, but I'm an autocrat specialist. So in the long run, I think that he is not going to win. Trump's a little more difficult. Trump is...

Andrea Chalupa (09:28):

He's running for president with four indictments.

Ruth Ben-Ghiat (09:30):

He's running for president and the fatal flaw was to allow him to be there for two years paying no price. It's very, very important that he's indicted now, that all these co-conspirators are indicted. But what it did from the point of view of personality cults, which your book talks about, is that the strongman has to seem untouchable by the law. He has to seem that he can get away with things. That's the essence of authoritarianism is getting away with crime. And that Trump seemed to do for his followers. So this is why, in part, his personality cult is still totally... It's ridiculous. The guy hasn't been in office for years and he's still super popular, right? He's still in control of the GOP and that scandalous—I'll end with this. I will never forget that debate where they all raced, people running against Trump.

Ruth Ben-Ghiat (10:31):

If you study authoritarian dynamics, they're running against Trump but they did a loyalty performance as though they were in Mobutu's Zaire.

Andrea Chalupa:

They raised their arm.

Ruth Ben-Ghiat:

They raised their hands to pledge that they would support him, even if he becomes a criminal. This is like the essence of the staging of authoritarianism. So he's very strong right now. I don't know what will happen on that. It's kind of ironic that—you'll see if you agree—we can say that in a way Putin's future because of the war is dimmer than Trump's right now.

Andrea Chalupa (11:12):

What do you think, Olga?

Olga Lautman (11:13):

First of all, thank you so much for having me and congratulations on your book. It's amazing. I'm really excited for it and happy that so many people will have access to seeing what dictatorships are, how they come to power, in a different form from people who normally don't want to read a full... like, you know, a book.

Andrea Chalupa (11:35):

I'm taking Olga out to dinner later.

[audience laughs]

Olga Lautman (11:39):

It's a very complicated question. I am definitely more hopeful than I was a few years ago. I mean, in 2015 and '16, I was devastated. I was watching Russia's attacks from the Russian side and I saw the tactics they were using and I knew that they were going to succeed. So, this time around though... It is hard to answer. On one hand, they're both going to fail. I am very confident. I'm hopeful on that end. Where I worry is that they have fractured our institutions, and the West is made of institutions. And as long as they have put the seed of distrust in institutions, it's going to be extremely hard to reverse that. And the way to reverse it is by dealing with corruption because once regular, everyday people start seeing officials not based on party, but if they're committing corruption and they're being charged, that's when you start rebuilding the trust.

Olga Lautman (12:43):

And for that, it's also difficult in the US because you had the Republican side for decades basically taking over every local media outlet across the country. And it's harder to have independent journalists. And unfortunately there's not enough investment to put these independent journalists in every single town to expose the corruption, whether it be a local sheriff or the state senator. So that is where I feel they are not winning. As far as with Trump, I frankly see him way weaker than he was years ago because I think people have already seen who he is. He's called for protests, he's called for storming the FBI, storming courthouses, and basically attempting to incite violence and, frankly, no one is showing up. We had the one loon who ran and thought it was a smart idea to shoot in an FBI office. I forgot which state.

Olga Lautman (13:47):

And then eventually the state police killed him. But you don't see the same support. And if his support is weaker than it was in 2016, then I don't think he'll be able in a general election to get back into power. And as far as Putin, Putin is done. I mean, frankly, in 2021 I was monitoring Russia's preparations for a full scale invasion. And I remember saying over and over, the minute Putin pulls this and if the West

reacts properly, he will be done. And Putin had miscalculated. He thought he was going to get a bunch of deep concerns from politicians as is what happened when he illegally annexed Crimea and occupied parts of Ukraine (Donbas and Luhansk) in 2014. But the West came together. Biden did an amazing job building a strong coalition that literally a year and a half later has withstood so many pressures and is still standing strong and ready to support and understand more so that if Putin succeeds in Ukraine, Moldova is next. Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland. Any one of the NATO members minus Moldova, that's American troops in Europe that we have to send.

Olga Lautman (15:15):

Right now it's Ukrainians sacrificing their blood to stop the threat inside of that country. So, Putin is finished. It's just a matter of time that he is removed. And even though Russia is not Putin, despite the media trying to convince people that Putin holds the power of Russia, Putin is a symptom of the system. And this is a century old system basically where he draws back to historical tendencies of what happened under czars and the Bolsheviks, the Communists and whatnot. And this time he took it a step too far and he's weakening inside. The West is doing an incredible job putting pressure sanctions-wise, sending weapons. Now, my problem is that the weapons aren't getting there fast enough. We shouldn't have been in discussions for, you know, six-eight months of whether tanks should go or not go because they could have been there already and Russia wouldn't have had the chance to fortify the front lines and mine the hell out of them.

Olga Lautman (16:29):

But ultimately Putin every single day is weakening. When the Soviet Union collapsed, there was less of an internal threat because of the lack of money. Here, we are talking about trillions of dollars these people stole from the country, from the state resources, and the fact that now you have a lot of businessmen and his heads of state companies and people surrounding him that have been cut off from access, at least from the West, of this money and can't move the money freely. I don't see him lasting for long. And with that said, once Putin goes, even though like I said, that Putin is just a symptom of the system, once Putin goes, there will be a disruption. And it's literally going to be like the '90s on steroids where you're going to see people vying for power and killing each other. You're going to see, again, car explosions and assassinations in order to secure the key positions.

Olga Lautman (17:33):

And with that, they will be distracted inside, which means that it'll take them a few years before they can continue carrying out these information operations against us; against Europe, against the United States. So the whole world will have a temporary reprieve. So I'm hopeful, but I still think we need to really focus on rebuilding trust in the institutions because democracy is about institutions. It's about our trust in them, and it's about our, basically, participation in it. And I think in America, including myself, we all took for granted until 2016, we thought America is a safe haven, especially for immigrants who came here and saw it as, "We are safe." And I think, you know, in 2016 we got a huge wake up call when we saw how for decades the Republicans were organizing, organizing, organizing. And here we were left, blindsided. And now we saw the after effects of pretty much things that we were dealing with post civil war we are now dealing with again. So I think we need to work on it. And I am very hopeful on that end because I mean, I remember in 2016 when I would look on Twitter, people would spread Russian disinformation without even understanding they're doing it. They didn't even mean to. They were anti-Trump, they were anti-Russia, but they did it. Now people are so savvy. They're like, "Oh, that's Russian disinformation. Oh, that's a bot, that's a troll." And that in itself, that knowledge is extremely important for people to go forward.

[advertisement for Cozy Earth]

Andrea Chalupa (20:46):

There's another element of it though that's out there today that was there in 2016, and it's just this vitriol, anchor, and I want to say hatred and just the storming of the barricade that was very clearly there in 2016. There were private Facebook groups for women/people to come together and support Hillary Clinton. They couldn't do it out in the open. I remember the streams on Twitter of people, especially young people, saying, "I hate Hillary. I want her to die." And they were supporters from other candidates. And we're seeing that now towards Biden. We're seeing that now about how many people just hate Biden. And it's coming from a place, I think a justifiable place, because we're seeing what climate scientists have warned us about for decades finally hitting us, coming to pass. People are living in economic anxiety. You have depression, anxiety levels over, "Are we all going to boil alive? Are we going to burn alive?"

Andrea Chalupa (21:49):

All of the news cycles from Hawaii to the Canadian fires and the floods, what's happening in Libya... We're living in the dystopias now, and people are looking to our elected officials and wanting to physically, verbally shake them and say, "Wake the fuck up. You're killing us. We need to see you. There's no action. You should be ringing the alarm. Why are we dealing with these knucklehead Nazis when we've got bigger problems like the corporate greed that's going to just kill us all for a short-term gain?" They're going to die too. You can't hide in a billionaire bunker. That's an oxymoron. So I'm seeing a lot of that 2016, I will be on the show blasting Biden for, let's say, East Palestine with what happened with that rail car creating a cancer cluster in Ohio. And then I'll say, "But Biden's keeping my friends and family alive in Ukraine."

Andrea Chalupa (22:43):

And then people on Twitter will be like, "Boohoo, fuck your family and friends in Ukraine. I hate Biden and you're automatically a Biden shill." I get that all the time and I haven't seen this level since 2016, and I don't know what to say to them because I have trouble sleeping at night, too. You know, we're in the same boat. But I think what I'm trying to sell, what I'm trying to advocate for is the only way out, really. And it's like... I know it's not fashionable. I know I'm not going to get invited to the cool parties, the cool panels—except for this one—but you need to flood the system. You need to become the new system. You need to run for office. You need to recruit and help good people run for office. You have to pay attention. And what people hear is like, "Oh, you're telling me I have to work?"

Andrea Chalupa (23:28):

I'm like, "Yeah." When people think I'm Thumper from Bambi on the podcast being like a little talking bunny in the woods, they don't understand that my chipperness comes from a really dark place; like, years of dark nights of the soul. I could have complained about *Mr. Jones* and the rampant misogyny, the toxic masculinity. That's all Hollywood is. Nobody wanted my screenplay. I had to outsmart the system. I had to infiltrate the system. I had to find the allies and build with my allies in the system. So when I'm telling everyone on the podcast again and again and again, "You are the new system now. We are the new system. You're the one you've always been waiting for. You need to get in there. You need to help people run for office." "No, but I want to bash things!" You don't think I want to bash things?

Andrea Chalupa (24:17):

I was, lemme just tell you something... Sorry Ruth, we're going to get to you because we're not going to waste... You're sitting there. Ruth Ben-Ghiat is right there and I'm like, "Lemme tell you my life story." You've heard it all. In high school, I was on a Top 10 list of the principal's most dangerous students. I had

what is known as an anger problem. A girl thought she could corner me in Home Ec and I had a hot iron in my hand. Put two and two together.

[audience laughs]

Andrea Chalupa:

I had detention for weeks. When I was in college, I got in a bar fight with a frat boy football player and I woke up with his hair and skin under my nails. I have an anger problem. I want to bash things. So when I'm looking at all of this "We're going to storm the barricade and you're a Biden shill if you're not with us," I've done my work on myself, okay? That might've been me 20 years ago, but I've done the work. I've met myself in that darkness and I've come out the other side and I've built things. And I understand fully well—fully well—there is no alternative to creativity and building. Destruction will not get us there. Ripping each other down will not get us there. Bullying will not get us there. Lifting each other up, learning to trust yourself and find your voice, carrying along others and helping them find their voice, having empathy in your heart for others, even when it's hard, there is no alternative to that right now. And I know we have fantasies of the French Revolution—a woman-led, a woman-instigated movement. But what ended up happening with the French Revolution was once the violence takes over, it becomes a blood sport and the sadists have a field day.

Andrea Chalupa (25:46):

And just to illustrate that: Marie Antoinette and her husband, the king, beheaded. Okay, good. Gone with them, right? They should have known better. [laughs] The writing was on the wall. But what happened to the new king, their 12-year-old child or however old he was? The king they left behind, their orphan son, was tortured. So these French revolutionaries, these guillotine builders, they tortured a child. That's what happens when you unleash violence: you lose control over it and it controls you. So I'm just telling all the people that want to bash instead of build, get a wiffle ball, take up kickboxing, get a pillow. I am the anger management queen by necessity and I'm telling you, there is no alternative to, You must build and create.

Olga Lautman (26:30):

Look, we have a lot of issues. Clearly putting it on Biden is laughable considering the bureaucracy in this country. I mean for them, I'm sure to change the lightbulb in Congress has to go through several departments and a hundred emails. Democracy, like I said, is us. It's all of us. We have to make a difference. And the difference is made and the biggest effects seen to people's lives are not from what Biden does. It is from what your state senate does, what your local judges do, what your school boards do. And violence definitely is not the solution because once you cross that line into violence, especially unprovoked, that is where you now will have the MAGA movement, who are literally ready to burn people's children because they were wearing a mask during covid and they were burning masks in front of schools and being completely irrational.

Olga Lautman (27:29):

You will have that happening. If, God forbid, it happens on the Left, then they're going to say, "Well, they're doing it. So if they're doing it, it's fine." And this is basically—just to take it back to Russia—Putin and his thugs have committed atrocities inside of Russia. They've jailed people. They've taken away whatever little fraction of independent media there is, and they've committed a lot of human rights abuses, as do all autocrats. But the day that we had our capitol stormed, the most blatant terrorist attack that was being live for several hours, guess what? Now Russia can turn around and say, "Oh, you know

what? But look what's happening there. Now they're arresting those people. Those are political prisoners." Meanwhile, they weren't political prisoners. I'd love to see how Russia would handle someone storming the Kremlin. But once you cross over into the violence unprovoked, then you are as equal and then you lose your higher ground. And the only time that violence would be acceptable is, for instance, during in Ukraine in 2014 when they had a corrupt, pro Kremlin, treasonous president, Yanukovich, Ukrainians came out but they came out peacefully. The only time that it turned into violence was when the security services started killing them, shooting at them, beating them, torturing them, dumping tortured bodies in Maidan Square. That's when it turned into violence. But it didn't start that way.

Andrea Chalupa (29:19):

Yeah. Yes to self-defense. No to instigating. Self defense, yes"

Olga Lautman (29:23):

No to unprovoked violence.

Andrea Chalupa (29:26):

So Ruth, right now, dystopia is now. And we have, of course, genocidal rhetoric; the scapegoating of LGBTQ+ people, non-white people, immigrants coming in. It's now, especially the anti-gay laws and trans people being denied life-affirming care. I have a friend who was in a blue state who didn't feel comfortable in a certain area holding her wife's hand in public. And that's heartbreaking. What do you say to the people who are living under fascism now, and how do we get them out from under? How do we protect them?

Ruth Ben-Ghiat (30:03):

Yeah. I think what's already been said about we have to be the change: running for office, supporting those who are running for office. It's very difficult to be in a position of enormous fear and what's so horrible—and I've been tracking this very closely for a long time—the GOP is in this kind of spiral of radicalization. That's what I call it. And although January 6th didn't work, it almost worked. It came way closer than people know. And they're kind of drunk on this lawlessness. And so Ron DeSantis is a good bellwether because he's like an empty shell of a person who makes himself into what he thinks will help him get ahead. And so he is constantly using violent rhetoric now, not just the famous thing where he said, "On my first day as president, we're going to slit throats." I mean, this is how gangsters talk.

Ruth Ben-Ghiat (31:01):

This is how Duterte talked in the Philippines. But he doesn't lose a single moment to not talk about committing violence. When Trump was arraigned and he was asked probably because the reporter knew it would annoy him, "Did you watch the arraignment?" What does he say? He's governor of a really big state. He's got a lot to do. He says, "I was overseeing an execution." So I track all these things. And then there's Matt Gaetz who goes to the state fair. And the state fair is the perfect place to engage in radicalization. Everybody's eating their corn dogs, they're distracted because their toddlers are peeing and whatever's going on. And Matt Gaetz is there with Trump, his leader, and he slips in. He has normal campaign rhetoric, "We're going to win." And then he says, "Only force can bring change to Washington, DC." So I was like, "Whoa, okay."

Ruth Ben-Ghiat (32:02):

Because what he's saying is, We no longer as a party are going to depend on elections, on democratic reform or any kind of legislation. This is fascist rhetoric. Only violence will do it. So this is why I say they're in a spiral of radicalization and it's very, very difficult and very frightening. But the answer is not, to pick up what was said before, to become violent ourselves. And sure, it's easy to blame Biden, but honestly, if you study authoritarianism and what the conditions have been cyclically to create an environment where they can have an appeal, the stuff that Biden is doing—the large scale, the student debt stuff, the large scale economic and social reform, bringing back manufacturing to help communities—this is stuff that's not going to have an effect right now, so people are like, “Well, screw him. We need stuff now.” Right? “We're under siege right now.”

Ruth Ben-Ghiat (33:06):

But that actually—lifting up communities and changing economic circumstances for the long run—is how you defeat authoritarianism because you address despair. That's what Trump went in. Trump was so smart where he identified—he's a marketer—he looked at the political marketplace and he found these people who were hurting (white working class) and Clinton wasn't addressing them. The Democrats overlooked them. And he's like, “You're the forgotten. I love you, and you are forgotten no longer.” He seemed like the person who was going to help them, right? They didn't know he was just playing with them. So there are things that we can learn from all of this. And in fact, Biden is, with all the stuff in manufacturing, all the jobs created, I don't have much patience... Of course, should he do more on climate? Yes. He's done more than others. Of course, we want him to do more on climate and other things.

Ruth Ben-Ghiat (34:06):

And he's a convenient... He's not a figurehead, but he's a convenient symbol of the democratic establishment. And it's of course very easy to be frustrated. But that in my humble opinion, is not the right target. The targets have to be the fascists in our midst. Get them out of office because these are the people preaching violence. Having studied fascism for years, the violent stuff, I'm all over that. That is the red line. That is the line. What they've been doing, and Trump's been doing this since 2015... So, if you want—fascists have done it, and other authoritarians—you have to change the public's perception of violence. That's one of the major goals of propaganda. You have to get people to see violence as morally righteous and necessary. So Trump... And I had the honor of being interviewed and doing a report for the January 6th committee and this is what it was about.

Ruth Ben-Ghiat (35:10):

I compiled a list, and I got really scared when I was compiling this list. And I never underestimate Trump. He uses his rallies as radicalization sites and interviews and all that, but hundreds of rallies over the years where he talked about violence in a positive way, like, “In the old days, we could carry people out in a stretcher. Now you can't do that. You can't hurt people anymore.” over and over and over again. And so that's why Matt Gaetz and these other people, and DeSantis, they're continuing this. And that's how you get fascism. So Biden and the Democrats are not doing that and they are the bulwark. They are the fortress, the citadel against these people who are really trying to create a fascist population that will engage in violence. We already had January 6th, so we already saw how that ends.

Andrea Chalupa (36:11):

People look at the income inequality, the staggering levels. People look at the promises that were not kept, especially on climate, and the fact that you have Gen Z desperate for a climate emergency. And so there's this feeling of, We're held hostage by the oligarchy. We're held hostage by corporate corruption, corporate exploitation, because if we don't vote for the Democrats, then we're all going to be in camps and watch our children be murdered in front of us. It's sort of the alternative is like, You must maintain

the status quo of corporations having captured both parties and any pushback against it, it's game over for you.

Ruth Ben-Ghiat (36:52):

But without a doubt, there's an element of the Democratic party—and it's not only skewed with age, some of it is—that they are elitist, of a different era. But the answer to that is exactly what happened after the Women's March, for example. The Women's March was the biggest nonviolent protest ever in American history. Why it was doubly important is because thousands of women got energized, progressive women, to run for office, young women. And in 2018, a lot of them got in. And that's how you get the AOCs. That's how you get the people who perhaps—and again, it's not only skewing on age, it's more like progressive. You've got to support them. I interviewed Amanda Litman, and she's the head of Run for Something. You've got to support these people. Now, again, it takes time. And so people justifiably say, “We don't have time. I'm threatened because I'm gay today. Or my city is up in flames from climate change today.” But what's the alternative if you don't support this?

Olga Lautman (38:01):

Exactly. And I'll add to that. Look, we see. We don't have to imagine. All we have to do is peek over into probably what now we're 25 states that have practically banned abortion, that are going after the LGBTQ community. You don't have to imagine this is what they're going to do. They're doing it right now. Whereas you have states that are controlled by Democrats, maybe the Democrats are not a perfect party. Personally, I stay away as far as I can from politics. But right now, our biggest concern is to stop fascism here. That's our biggest concern. To stop the violence, to stop fascism, because if this spreads to all the states, we're not going to be able to deal with climate change. We're not going to be able to deal with serious issues. So first, we have to basically vote and do everything we can; mobilize everyone. Right now, frankly, my frustration with the Democrats... Every university should be visited and every single woman should be spoken to that basically Republicans want to have some frickin' old guy who is going to come and tell you what you can do with your body, which is absurd. I mean, no one should have control over a woman's body. So first we have to defeat that. Then we can go and start perfecting. We can work a dual—

Andrea Chalupa (39:28):

We defeat fascism and we build the world we want—

Olga Lautman:

Mhmm [affirmative]

Andrea Chalupa:

—on the local level because that's where the scariest threats are with the school boards and all that.

Olga Lautman (39:36):

Well, that's exactly it, because look with the covid.

Andrea Chalupa (39:40):

I want to get to Ukraine fatigue because I'm not tired at all about talking about Ukraine, but I sense a lot of my super cool hipster friends in media especially don't talk about Ukraine anymore. It's missing from their timelines. And when they do, they're feeding into the like, "Ooh, look at Ukraine taking our..." They're doing little subtle dog whistles to show the other cool hipster friends in media that it's corruption, they're anti-establishment. Meanwhile, Ukrainians are just desperate to survive a genocide. And it's just surreal to me because in 2016, I remember telling a friend in media, I'm like, "Paul Manafort's here. That means the Kremlin's here. You don't understand what the Kremlin's done to Ukraine." And she said to me, "Andrea, Americans don't care about Ukraine." And she was right. And Obama said the same thing with his foreign policy. "What does Ukraine have to do with us?"

Andrea Chalupa (40:32):

And that attitude is back. And I see it on the Twitter timelines of people who should know better, but they're clout chasing and/or they're self-censoring because they know that Elon Musk is going for the Twitter people, and God forbid if their tweets get hidden and they can't promote their books and sell their books and make money so Ukraine has to be a sacrificial lamb that has to go. So I was unfashionable in 2016 when I was warning everyone about the Kremlin and Ukraine, and I'm happy to be unfashionable again going into 2024. That's like, my sweet spot. So what do you say to Ukraine fatigue and where it came from and what to do about it?

Ruth Ben-Ghiat (41:10):

It's difficult to evaluate because so much is the Russians have been hammering this, and they've got so many agents like Marjorie Taylor Greene and countless other people.

Andrea Chalupa (41:25):

And on the Left.

Ruth Ben-Ghiat:

Yeah.

Andrea Chalupa:

All of these podcasters doped up with Peter Thiel money and David Sacks money, the PayPal Mafia.

Olga Lautman (41:34):

You have to remember the Soviet Union initially targeted the Left. It was always the Left that was the target since the Cold War.

Andrea Chalupa:

I made a film about it.

Olga Lautman:

Yeah, and that's who was targeted. It was the Left. I mean, the Right was a fairly new phenomenon over the past maybe decade, decade and a half. But it was Left. So now you see, and the Left is always with these American colonialism and the CIAs behind everything on this planet because they apparently exist—

Andrea Chalupa (42:03):

American imperialism and the CIA is well-functioning. [laughs] Yeah.

Ruth Ben-Ghiat (42:07):

But it's a failure of education because it's very clear what Russia stands for, and it's an existential threat. And as you said, you don't have to be into the geopolitics of the area to know that autocrats, that he will go for other countries. And so what's needed is a kind of generosity of spirit, and somehow people are no longer... It's partly fatigue, but it's partly that they're not connecting themselves to this struggle. It seems too remote, or they used to but they no longer do. But I do think people have been assaulted by psychological warfare and information warfare so much that... And then here we go with also when the worst things get locally and there's lots of crisis actors in the GOP who are Russian assets who want to make things as bad as possible locally so you don't have the energy, you're too much at siege in your town or in your city so you don't have the energy to see the connections.

Ruth Ben-Ghiat (43:09):

So what I always try to do in my work is show the connections between things, like autocrats and environmental plunder and how they're an existential threat, because that's how you counter that. But it's challenging, right? And the more that the local becomes fraught and dangerous, where people are being forced out as election workers or town council members or librarians, if you teach at a university, you could be fired now, the more that's all fraught, you don't have the luxury you feel of caring about Ukraine. And yet it's all connected.

Andrea Chalupa (43:54):

It's all connected. The Republican party is mobbed up with the Russian mafia and the Kremlin. It's the same enemy, and they want to divide us and pit Ukrainians against people who are really desperate and hurting, and we can't let them do that.

Olga Lautman (44:12):

Yeah, no, the support must continue for Ukraine because frankly I think the best thing we can all start doing is for starters explaining to people that if their pothole on their street is broken, that has absolutely zero to do with the money going to Ukraine. And this is where there's a huge disconnect because people think that the Pentagon budget is supposed to fix your local things, where it is not. And if you can count how much money was going to Iraq and Afghanistan on a daily basis per what is going to Ukraine on a daily basis, and Ukraine is holding the line, Ukraine is Europe. I mean, if God forbid Russia succeeds in Ukraine and moves in through Europe, which they say—

Andrea Chalupa (45:01):

But Russia's going to succeed in Florida with all the dark money it's pumping into Florida, Russia's going to succeed in—

Olga Lautman (45:07):

Well—

Andrea Chalupa (45:08):

It's not just Europe, it's our—

Olga Lautman (45:11):

But that's been happening for the past decade here, unfortunately.

Andrea Chalupa (45:14):

But that's going to continue and become more emboldened.

Olga Lautman:

Yeah.

Andrea Chalupa:

So, what do we do, Ruth, if we wake up one morning in November and Trump's won the electoral college again? He'll lose the popular vote, but he sneaks through the electoral college. What do we do?

[pause]

[audience laughs]

Ruth Ben-Ghiat (45:30):

[laughs] What do we do? We protest. We go out into the streets, nonviolent, and we show as happened in 2017. Again, I'm going to repeat myself. Why? Because 2017 led to thousands of people running for office. And that has changed our political system. The lesson of history is that you have to use the rights you have at every moment. If you don't use them, there are people all too willing to take them away. And then later... Well, you have in your book, one of the themes is "Who could have seen it coming?" And I'm thinking a lot right now about denial, because they're traumatized, they're tired, but they're also in denial and they don't really want... Like when I'm on TV or I'm at an event and all, I say really blunt things like, "The GOPs, an autocratic party of criminals." or "It's in a spiral of radicalization." and people look at me like, "Really?" It just seems exaggerated. It's upsetting to people. And "It can't happen here" stuff, that's very, very strong in America that it can't happen here. As somebody who... I didn't really study American history too much, I always studied other histories and so I look at America. It's like our democracy only started in the '60s with the civil rights movement, that's when it started. So it's young and there's huge backlash.

Andrea Chalupa (47:04):

My French husband calls us a teenager,

Ruth Ben-Ghiat (47:08):

Yeah, but people don't see it that way and so they're in enormous denial. That's also with January 6th. And it's also interesting when these things come out, like Romney, who sent that text to Mitch McConnell, like, "Hi, I heard that there might be bombs and stuff like that." Then Mitch McConnell didn't reply. But what I think is interesting is that we know that now there's these co-conspirators—the Mark Meadows, etc.—but there's a whole other group of people like Mitt Romney who knew about things. Now, we don't really know what he did. But what's shocking is that these are people who are among the most powerful people in our nation with access through their years of being in the Senate and the other

in the Pentagon too, they had access to everyone and everything in intelligence. And yet they didn't do anything. They didn't band together.

Ruth Ben-Ghiat (48:08):

So while we have been focusing on the co-conspirators, there's all these other people who just maybe thought that "It can't really happen. It can't happen here." So that's a big problem that we have to face, and that's why each one of us can do it in our own way. I try and educate people and warn them that no place is immune. In fact, in all of the case studies in my book, every society was shocked that it happened to them. And even when there was a coup in Chile—this is super interesting—the Christian Democrats actually thought that Pinochet was going to just restore order and then give back power to democracy. Well, that didn't happen. So it's not just us who is... We perhaps are worse than others, but it's a syndrome. It's a psychological syndrome.

Andrea Chalupa (49:10):

There's nothing exceptional here. So final question, what would you say to the parents that have to raise their children in America? What could you tell to parents? Do their children have a future?

Ruth Ben-Ghiat (49:23):

Yeah, it would be very dangerous to tell your children that they wouldn't have a future. You have to tell them—

Andrea Chalupa (49:29):

They might read it on your face and anxiety. "Why is mom always yelling at the TV?"

[audience laughs]

Ruth Ben-Ghiat (49:35):

Well, you could spin that as engagement and passion.

Andrea Chalupa (49:39):

She's out again at a protest. [laughs] Mom and dad don't see each other anymore.

Olga Lautman (49:44):

My son runs around telling people, "My mommy..." "What does your mom do?" "Oh, she's out to kill Putin."

[audience laughs]

Ruth Ben-Ghiat (49:51):

Exactly. But the worst thing is indifference. The indifference, the not acting at all, is what allows autocracy to come in and allows institutionalized racism to endure. So setting an example in whatever way it is that you feel you can contribute—and there are many ways—is important. And letting your kids know. I have a daughter. So I think that's important to model that.

[outro - theme music]

Andrea Chalupa:

Our discussion continues, and you can get access to that by signing up on our Patreon at the Truth-teller level or higher.

Andrea Chalupa:

To help people in Maui rebuild, donate to the Maui Strong fund at hawaiicommunityfoundation.org. And if you or a friend want to go to Burning Man next year, instead donate that money to the Ali Forney Center, the largest community center in the US helping homeless LGBTQ youth. To help humanitarian aid in Ukraine, donate to Razom for Ukraine at razomforukraine.org. In addition, we encourage you to donate to the International Rescue Committee, a humanitarian relief organization helping refugees from Ukraine, Syria, and Afghanistan. Donate at rescue.org. And if you want to help critically endangered orangutans already under pressure from the palm oil industry, donate to the Orangutan Project at theorangutanproject.org.

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