

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

BILL KRISTOL:

Hi. I'm Bill Kristol. Welcome back to *Conversations*. I'm very pleased to be joined again by Anne Applebaum. We had a conversation almost exactly a year ago, right? I think it was the day before the war began. We assumed Putin would invade, and actually your comments from the time, your analysis stands up very well, in terms of Putin's motives, and the way he would conduct the war, in terms of Ukraine, a little bit on Europe. So, I want to go back over all of that.

But just to reintroduce Anne, a Pulitzer Prize winning historian, must-read writer for *The Atlantic*, not just on Ukraine and Russia, but focusing on that, obviously, in the last year. *Twilight of Democracy*, an excellent book written a couple of years ago. And I guess maybe you're best known for the books on the Soviet Union, on the Gulag history, and on Stalin's War on Ukraine. And those are all terrific books. So, a rare combination of historical depth and crisp commentary on current events. So, Anne, thanks for joining me again.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

Thanks for having me again.

BILL KRISTOL:

So, let's go right to it, and let's just talk about, you know so much about Ukraine, Russia. I feel like some of the conversation about the war, understandably, and I engage in this too, is very general, autocracy, democracy, which is fine and important. But let's talk about the actual country. So, it's a year in. So, what have you learned? What surprised you? What should we all know about? Let's just begin with Ukraine. Let's begin with the uplifting side, rather than Putin's Russia. So, what about Ukraine?

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

So, the Ukrainians have surpassed all expectations. I mean, if you look back to what people were saying a year from now, I was part of a lot of conversations in Washington and elsewhere, in which the fall of Kyiv was widely anticipated. The assumption was that, okay, there would be a guerilla war and the fighting would go on for a long time, maybe even many years, but the Ukrainian state was very unlikely to survive. I did think that this was a wrong assumption at the time, and I'm fortunate enough to have said so publicly in a couple of places.

BILL KRISTOL:

That's good.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

But of course, we all had doubts. Nobody really knew, because we didn't quite know what the scale of the attack would be.

But I think what has happened is that the Ukrainians have shown, first of all, that their army and their military were far better prepared, kind of psychologically, and in terms of planning and so on, than anybody had guessed. I mean, the country didn't do something, so they didn't

produce lots of ammunition in advance. They didn't reinforce their cities in advance. There were things in retrospect that could have been done, and if you go around Ukraine, you hear people say that. And it would have been nice to have wider, broader social preparation, but the army was prepared.

And the army has also shown itself to be very creative. It uses what equipment it has, whether it's drones you can buy on the internet, and they call it "MacGyvering." Fixing them up to be able to do other things they weren't supposed to be able to do. They're extremely creative. They use their weapons well. There is no hint, by the way, of any corruption to do with the army. All that is very straightforward.

And the other thing that has been, again, not surprising if you knew Ukraine, but really, by comparison to other societies in other times and places, Ukrainian society, the way in which spontaneous volunteer groups have organized themselves, whether to help the army, or to help refugees, or to run cities in the absence of... I've got a story coming out today about cities and towns under occupation, people really rising to the challenge in extraordinary ways. It's always been a kind of grassroots society. It's better ground-up. The state was always much weaker than the society, and it was always a place where people were suspicious of power, but able to organize on the ground. And all of that has played out just unbelievably well.

I was in Ukraine last summer. I've been several times, three times actually, since the war began. And I spent a few days in Odessa, and just the range of people, and groups, and organizations who are creatively seeking to help the war effort is astonishing. And I think Ukrainians deserve an enormous amount of credit for that. I mean, again, when people write the history of the war, and when they look back, they will talk about some of the lack of preparation. They will talk about some weaknesses in Zelensky's government. There are things people don't like, and I even wonder whether he'll be reelected, even assuming they win. I can imagine a Churchill situation in which people say, "Right now, we want something else." But he has also surpassed expectations as well. People said, "He's an actor. He's a comedian. What does he know about wars?" But it turns out he's not only that, he's also a television producer. Everybody around him is a television producer.

BILL KRISTOL:

Right.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

They think a lot about how to send a message, how to galvanize people at home, how to speak to people abroad. And he is, of course, one of the great discoveries of the war.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. No. I mean, you mentioned Churchill. I do feel like in our lifetime, this is the closest we've seen to a sort of Britain 1940 situation, both in terms of leadership and in terms of the public behaving with really impressive and admirable courage and determination, but also calmness and resolution. And it's really something to see. And a year ago when we talked, you said that people had underestimated the sort of democratic and liberal development, and development of civil society in Ukraine, especially from 2014 on. But say a word about that. I guess I had this sort of rather conventional view that, I mean, obviously god knows I wish them well, and was all for helping them as much as we could. But I also had read about the corruption, and the problems, and the oligarchs, all the election. The hopes of 2014 having been dashed in some respect. But that was a deeper transformation than I think I realized.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

One of the things that people didn't realize about... Two things I think are important. One is how young the Zelensky team is. I mean, this is a country run now by people in their thirties

and forties. And that's very important in the Ukrainian context, because that means those are all people who aren't connected to the old Soviet system, and don't even really remember it. And in a lot of cases, it also means they're not even really connected to the sort of oligarchic system that ran the country in the nineties and most of the first part of the 2000s. So there was a kind of generational change.

And the other thing that turned out to be important was, Ukraine has pretty active local democracy, so kind of local mayors, and locally elected politicians are authentic. I mean, they're not appointed by somebody. These elections aren't fake. They're real people. And that also turned out to matter a lot. So local mayors in occupied zones were able to do things for people and help them, and they felt an obligation to them, and they had actual real authority because they were elected, and all of that turned out to matter a lot.

And then, as I said, Zelensky's ability to communicate was another piece of the story. Every night now he does a national broadcast. It's very short. It's five minutes. He does it on his cell phone. And so, no production values, no lighting, no TV studio, just his little phone, and he speaks into the phone. And of course, speaking to the phone, and by the way, the way he's dressed, he's dressed as a member of the Ukrainian Territorial Army. So, like an average soldier. Not like a general.

And all of that is, on the one hand, staged, in that they think about it. "We want to look authentic." And he wants to look like a normal person. "I'm a normal person who's accidentally found himself in this extraordinary situation." And the only other thing, it works because it's true. So, it's not just fake authenticity. It's real. I mean, he really is a normal person who found himself in this situation. And so what that means is that lots of people identify. So ordinary people who are in the Territorial Army, or they're helping out even not at the frontline, but helping with food distribution or something, they can all empathize with him, and he's speaking to them. And that turned out to be an aspect of his presidency and of the society that was probably much stronger than anyone expected.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. It's such an amazing demonstration of democratic, small D, leadership. To speak to the people every night, and I guess pretty candidly give them updates, and acknowledge that there's been terrible things have happened, and there have been some places that things haven't gone quite as well as they hoped.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

Yeah. And they've made some mistakes. Yeah.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. I mean, that's a pretty... So say a word about that. I mean, I'm really struck by that the depth of liberalism, or democratic values, or both, I suppose, in Ukraine, obviously side by side with a very deep nationalism and a defense of their country. The Fatherland, the Motherland. But again, reminds me of 1940 and the degree to which Churchill both, you read those speeches, appeals to, of course, the great history of Britain, and, "This could be our finest hour," and so forth, but also very explicitly that, "We are the defense of freedom. Without us, we are looking at a new dark age," and so forth. And I feel like that, again, a very unusual moment to see those two come together so dramatically.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

So, in my view, this is why Zelensky has been so successful around the world, and why he has such a deep appeal, is if you think of our culture war as ... Okay, this is very, very crude. On the one hand, liberal values. But on the other hand, nationalism, or patriotism, or whatever you want to call it. What he does is a patriotic, nationalistic defense of liberal values. And that's

why he can appeal to a wide part of the political spectrum, not just in the US, but all across Europe, because people can identify with that. And it's a thing that people have felt to be missing. And I think that's the source of it. And again, it also works because it's true. His government and his administration is not ethnically Ukrainian, and doesn't have an attachment to ethnic nationalism. They were elected as a representative of civic patriotism. Nobody ever uses that kind of language in Ukraine, but that's in effect what he stood for, and so it's real.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. It's so interesting and inspiring, really. I mean, anything else? You've been there three times since the war began. You talk to people there all the time. You read so much more than the rest of us do from Ukraine itself. Anything else you would want people here who aren't following it nearly as closely should know? I mean, you feel pretty good about the general, the strength of civil society, so to speak, the strength of liberal and democratic values there. Wars put pressure, often, on those things.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

Yeah. I feel strongly about those things. I feel one aspect of the story that hasn't been fully understood, and I just wrote this today, in fact. I haven't even had time to look. It should be up on *The Atlantic* website within a few minutes.

BILL KRISTOL:

Today is February 14, for those who will be watching this a little later, but yeah.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

By the time you hear it, it'll definitely be online. I've written, together with a Ukrainian journalist and some of her colleagues, a piece about what happened in the occupied territories. And we can write this now, because some of them have been liberated. And maybe this leads us to the government of Russia, but I think that the nature of what has happened there, the arrests, the torture... In every single liberated town, there's a torture chamber. In every single liberated town, children are missing. The rounding up of children, separating them from their parents, sending them to Russia. The arrests of small town mayors and local counselors, the kinds of people we were just talking about. The arrests of volunteers, people who organize these volunteer organizations. The nature of the occupation is horrific and cruel in a way that we've genuinely not seen in Europe since 1945.

And of course, for me, actually, 1945 might even be the wrong year to use, because for me, what it reminds me the most of is what the Red Army did when it occupied Central Europe in '44, '45, '46, '47. It's the same kind of, "Decapitate society. Do mass arrests. Send people to prison, and try and reshape the society." And the level of cruelty and violence that is being used there, I mean, forget the war zones. I'm not even talking about places where people are being bombarded. And the pictures you see on TV are mostly war zones. What you aren't seeing is what's happening in occupied Ukraine. And it's important to understand that, because when we start talking about how the war is going to end, and whether the Ukrainians can trade territory away or not, and maybe they can, and we can talk about that in a minute if you want.

The issue isn't the territory or the land. The issue is what has happened to people in those places, and what is going on now. Everybody in Ukraine knows this, but I don't know that the outside world understands this story. We are talking about concentration camps, mass murder, torture, arrests, torment of children, all inflicted on these zones of occupation. And the level of the crime and the knowledge of it is, I think, only just beginning right now to seep out of Ukraine.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. And for that reason, just to, I think, dot your I and cross your T on this, I mean, the notion of a compromise, land for peace and all that, it's not land for peace, right? It's Ukrainian people for alleged peace.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

It's Ukrainian people.

BILL KRISTOL:

And then being treated in this barbaric way. I mean, we're going to have UN observers in there making sure that it's a decent situation, and the whatever places, if there are some, that Ukraine doesn't get back. Well, what about Russia? I mean, you've written so much about it, and you of all people probably aren't surprised in a way that this is what Putin's Russia has come to, or were you surprised? Are you surprised?

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

Surprise is the wrong word. I mean, I did know what kind of a society it was. I suppose the surprise has been in the... Well, again, is that really surprising? I was about to say the lack of reaction at the highest levels of society. So, one of the functions of Russian propaganda, and one of the ways it works inside the country is that it's designed to make people apathetic. So, Russians don't have public opinion in the way we think of it. They don't have views like, "I'm right wing," or "I'm left wing." Or "I think this" or "I think that" and "I can engage in a public argument with someone on social media about it." It doesn't work like that. There's an official view, and if you want to keep your job, you stick to the view. But even privately, you don't go there, mostly. Some percentage of the country does, but mostly, politics is a faraway dirty world that you want nothing to do with. You don't want to talk about it. You don't want to be involved in it, because it's just dangerous and nasty.

And so, the prediction that the public would be apathetic or distanced or not participating in the war, it works both ways, I should say. There's no mass protest movement against the war. On the other hand, there's also no pro-war movement either. And so, you don't see people marching in the street calling for war. They do these really staged kind of TV demonstrations sometimes and they put these horrible propagandists on TV. But there's no evidence inside Russia that people are excited or enthusiastic about it, on the contrary. Think of hundreds of thousands of people that have left. People stay home. They don't participate. They don't want to talk about it or hear about it.

I'm surprised that at the higher levels of society, so the upper levels of the security services, maybe the business community, that there hasn't been a little bit more signs of breaking. There are weird things that happen. I actually just read about a strange suicide of a high ranking Russian official in the last couple of days. And there are these business people and others who fall out of windows. And I assume that's all signs of things, some kind of internal dissent.

But I'm surprised it's lasted this long and given how badly it's gone, because there's no hiding the fact that given the expectations inside Russia and outside Russia of the state of the Russian Army, which was thought to have been renewed and reformed and rebuilt and expanded and so on, and was supposed to be in such good shape, the catastrophic behavior of Russian soldiers has to have... People have clearly have noticed.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

And I'm surprised there hasn't been a little bit more elite objection to the war on those grounds.

BILL KRISTOL:

And Putin just continues to go ahead, in your view? He's been all-in, and all-in time and time again, so to speak. He could have maybe early on sort of tried to snatch a little territory and say that was enough and he made his point. But of course, as you said a year ago when we talked, that isn't his point, right? His point is to destroy Ukraine as a viable nation—

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

No, no. It's really—

BILL KRISTOL:

...and a democracy, liberal democracy.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

Yeah. It's really not his point. So, his point is, and he's still saying, by the way, and the TV propagandists are still saying, "Our goal is to destroy Kyiv and make Ukraine into a puppet state." So this is one of biggest problems I have with the sort of chorus of people who say, "We need to trade land for peace," or "We need to negotiate." Okay, great. Let's negotiate. Now explain to me, how are you going to get Putin to give up on his main goal, which is the conquest of Kyiv? Because until he does that, what are we negotiating about? And we're negotiating about a cease— Okay, we can have a ceasefire. We could stop fighting for six months. Meanwhile, he rebuilds his army, he gets some more weapons from Iran, and then he rebuilds the army and starts again. So, do you want to have another war next year or in two years?

None of these are... This isn't a reasonable way to end the war. And there's kind of bogus even, "Oh, for Ukraine's sake. Ukraine's country is being destroyed." That's all true. But what option does Ukraine have? Stopping the fighting means that the country is occupied in the ways we've just described. So, all leaders will be dead, and all of the children will be deported and the country will be destroyed if it's occupied. So, the Russians aren't giving them a choice. And so, of course, they have to fight back. It's pretty clear that something is going on in Russia that's negative. There is some visible fighting in the security services in the Army. There are some kind of power struggles happening. As I said, I'm surprised it's not more and not more vocal, but it's not as if no one has noticed that the war isn't going well.

Like I said, for the moment, Putin appears not to have given up on his main goals. And therefore, the point of our continuing to support Ukraine and the point of Ukraine fighting should be to continue to fight until there is some kind of change in Russia. And I'm not going to tell you what that is. I don't know whether it's replacing Putin or whether Putin himself changes or whether something else happens. But Russia has to get to the stage that France was when it decided it no longer wanted to be a colonial power in Algeria, or that Britain did in Ireland at the beginning of the 20th century, that, "Okay, this is not part of our country anymore." So, they need to overcome that imperial, whatever it is, the imperial instinct and give up.

And that does happen. We know it has happened. We can see it at other moments in history. In the case of Russia, as I think, as you say I said a year ago, I hope that's what I said a year ago. In the case of Russia, there is an additional ideological element, which is that Putin feels that Ukraine represents not just a territory or a colonial part of Russia, but also that it has a political culture that scares him. He's afraid of Ukrainian democracy and this civic patriotism that we've just been talking about, because it could inspire Russians. But something has to

happen. They have to give that up. They have to understand that the war was a mistake. And that's the moment when we can actually negotiate and the war can end.

BILL KRISTOL:

And in the meantime, Ukraine has to fight and take back as much territory as possible, right?

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

Yeah. And it's through taking back territory and through winning the war that we will get to a moment where negotiation is possible, and we have not reached that yet. And anybody who comes up with a formula now, I'm almost sick of being asked this. This week, in the run-up to the anniversary, I've been asked many times, "When will the war end?" The war will end when it's over. It will end when the Ukrainians win. If the Ukrainians don't win, it won't end, ever. So maybe a Russian-occupied Ukraine would bring Russian troops to the border with Poland. It would create a new threat to Poland, maybe even to Germany, certainly to the Baltic States. So, if you want the war to end and you want this particular security challenge to Europe to be over, we have to win.

BILL KRISTOL:

And okay, let's talk about Europe since you spent a lot of time there and you're going to Munich later this week for that Security Conference. I had been there a few weeks ago, and I'm going again to try to talk to Germans and others, Poles, Ukrainians, Balts, Fins, Swedes. I think the conventional view, which I guess I agree with, is Europe has been better, so to speak, stronger, more resolute, more willing to adjust to a new reality than one might have thought 14 months ago, certainly, when the elites were mostly invested in a vision of trading with Russia and so forth. And one forgets how recently they had reaffirmed their commitment to Nord Stream. And so, you couldn't say the kinds of things, you couldn't talk about Russia in a serious way, frankly, in an honest way, I would almost say, in some of these countries, at least, not in all of them. So, I don't know. Walk us, maybe begin with Germany, that's the biggest actor, I don't know, biggest, but maybe not the most decisive actor at this point. So anyway, talk about that.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

Germany, I feel, since we don't have to do sound bites here, I think it's very important to be nuanced. Okay? So, Germany, on the one hand, has genuinely overcome decades of a dedication to pacifism and a horror of any kind of involvement in a European war. And Chancellor Scholz, at the very beginning of the war, sort of three or four days into the war, made a really remarkable speech in which he talked about a turning point. You know— "This is a new moment in history. We need to think completely differently. We need to have a different kind of army. Germany has no army. And we need to behave differently."

After that, it got more complicated, and the Germans didn't really change their army as much as they said they were going to. And they became very nervous about what kind of weapons they were going to give to Ukraine. The Germans are very paranoid of being attacked themselves. They are directly in... You know that Russia owns a territory called Kaliningrad.

BILL KRISTOL:

Right.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

Which is a little piece of the Baltic, sort of up on the Baltic Sea. And there are thought to be tactical nuclear weapons there, which could hit Berlin. So just so that know, that's in the back of their minds. And they do think about that, and they're aware of it, too. So, you get this kind

of schizophrenic back and forth, where they can sound good and then they don't come up with the goods. More recently, they have become, they are I think now the third largest donor of weapons if you look at value to Ukraine. They are an enormous donor of funding. Some of it goes through the EU rather than directly. They're one of the largest places where refugees live. Actually, the refugees who were staying with me in Poland are now there.

The debate inside Germany is very open. There are some very prominent advocates for helping Ukraine from the Green Party, from the Liberal Party. The Foreign Minister is very clear in her views. You can also hear the opposite view. You can hear pro-Russian voices on the far right in Germany, and there's a little bit on the far left as well. But it's a robust conversation. It's really very much at the center of political debate, much more so, I think, than almost anywhere else in Europe.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, that's right.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

And so, you can see there has been a transition and there has been a change. Maybe it hasn't gone far enough yet, but we're going the right direction.

BILL KRISTOL:

I was struck — Jeff Gedmin and I were there about three, four weeks ago — and again, to generalize from three days of private meetings, but we saw a lot, an awful lot of people. The way I came back, and I guess we wrote something, the *Zeitenwende* is real. The turning point is real. It's hesitant. It's a little bit two steps forward, one step back. It's not in every part of society, but they've liberated from Russian energy. Some of the stuff beneath the surface, I think, especially in energy policy been pretty dramatic. And the general spirit seemed, to me, especially among younger politicians, to be very different from five years ago or one and a half years ago. They really have begun to assimilate that this is... We're not going... One German politician got in trouble for saying this, "There's going to be a new normal, whenever this war ends." And she was sort of, "Oh no, that's too dramatic." But in fact, no one there thinks they can go back to the old normal, I think. And that is true.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

No, no. Actually, the decision to cut off Russian gas supplies and to liberate themselves from that and really recreate their energy system in that period of time is extraordinary. Almost no other country could have done that. And there's even some anger in Europe that the Germans put so much money into it and they were less helpful maybe to others who have also an energy crisis. But they did it, and it's a pretty spectacular change. And remember this is a change not just from the past few years, but the German dependence on Russian energy goes back to the 1970s, you know?

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

So, it's a very, very old relationship. And ripping that up is a... Destroys a lot of assumptions about German industry and so on. There has been a, in that sense, a pretty big change.

BILL KRISTOL:

Someone I was talking to — a German — yesterday who said he thought one thing the Germans have part way down the road to thinking through, but not really is the relationship with their neighbors and the allies that, I mean, Germany is used to being with France, the engine of Europe, and there are these other little countries that come along and help out or don't help out, or they bully them to do things, or they save them from themselves in the case of the southern European countries. And to be fair, they have done, from a certain point of view, it's pretty amazing what Germany has pulled off with the European project in the EU. But I do think they're only a little bit down the road in thinking through the relationship with Poland, with Ukraine itself and the future, with the Balts, the Nordics.

And one thing we were encouraged to do, which just give you a concrete example there, was to bring a lot more people from those countries into these small meetings we're doing in Berlin, because even though they talk, of course, at the government to government level all the time, and to some degree at the think tank to think tank levels sort of, A, they end up squabbling about various things, reparations in the case of Poland.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

There's—

BILL KRISTOL:

And do you feel that's the case? Talk a little bit about Poland, which you know very well, but also the Nordic and the Balts, and yeah.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

There is a huge problem, I mean, and the problem is Poland and very specific, and I'll try not to talk about it too much. Poland should be right now, I don't know already officially part of the triumvirate that runs Europe, Poland, Germany, France. Poland, that has also an enormous source of weapons training and other equipment going into Ukraine. All of the American weapons are coming through Poland and going through Ukraine. So that was a big effort. Poland, is the, I think it's still the host of the largest number of refugees, but certainly it's very large. At the beginning of the war, everybody in the country had refugees staying with them that I know, including me. And it's been a big national effort and it's very important.

The trouble is Poland right now is run by an illiberal ruling party that sees as one of the pillars of its propaganda is how much they hate Germany. And they have almost no normal relationship with Germany. So they make Germany into an enemy. They accuse all of the opposition, including my, I should be clear, one of them is my husband, but certainly leaders of the opposition, they accuse them literally of being Germans. There's a clip of one of— the main leader of the opposition, Donald Tusk, there's a clip of him saying one fragment of a speech in German where he was saying a thank you to the, you know, he said, thank you for a conference and enjoy or goodbye, something, one sentence in German, and he uses the expression for Deutschland. And this little clip has been repeated nightly. They will show it on TV night after night after night and say, "He's German." And this is state TV is run, is now completely, you have to imagine kind of Breitbart TV, Breitbart takes over the BBC, and that's what state television is. Very, very nasty They run smear campaigns.

And so that's made a relationship between Poland and Germany almost impossible. And I don't think it's the German's fault, honestly. And Poland also has very poor relationships with almost everybody. The Czechs, difficult relationships with almost everybody in Europe. So, they've made a change in EU strategy difficult. Macron can't stand them. He won't be in the same room with them, the leaders of Poland. Every time they see each other, there's some kind of scandal or somebody says something insulting. So they've made it difficult for this to be normal. And they've also, I think the Poles, this particular ruling party has done a lot of damage even to Ukraine. People look at Ukraine and they say, "Are they going to become

another Poland? Are we going to have another headache like these people?" So that's a kind of complicating factor that makes the sort of heroic Poles save Europe story, which I would like to be able to tell you, complicated, so just since, as I said, since we're doing nuance here.

There is an election in Poland in October. It's going to be the ugliest election there has ever been. I hope it's, I mean, it's not going to be fair, but I hope it's free. I mean, they're going to try and use government money and state money in order to influence the outcome. It's hard for me to see how they're going to allow themselves to lose. They have taken over so much of the state and they have allocated so much state property and money to their own people and they're not going to want to give that up, but we'll see. It's going to be ugly, that's [inaudible].

BILL KRISTOL:

No, that's so interesting and important to— sorry.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

It's already started, actually, so it's—

BILL KRISTOL:

That's right. Yeah. No, I was struck just, again, knowing so much less, in Germany, they were griping about Poland. I had said to Jeff, who knows much more, "What are they, just like this is just ancient hostilities and the Poles—"

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

No, it's not.

BILL KRISTOL:

But it's not. And the Poles, I guess the degree to which it's central in Polish politics now, demand—

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

It's central to Polish politics, and it is—

BILL KRISTOL:

...reparations from Germany.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

And one of the reasons, I should say one of the reasons it's central to Polish politics is that the previous government, again, full disclosure, my husband was the foreign minister in the previous government, previous government was very close to Germany and there were a lot of Polish-German projects and there was an enormous amount of goodwill. And there was a series of meetings that there was a kind of Polish-German-French triangle. It was called the Weimar Triangle. So that was all happening, and this government decided to reverse that for, well, they think it's good for them domestic politically.

So it's not just, it's really not just some kind of ancient German problem with Poland. It's a Poland has create deliberately created this difficulty.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, which—

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

And the Polish demand for reparations just so that you know, I mean, Germany has paid, depending on how you count and how you look at it, has paid reparations to Poland several times in the form of land, in the form of enormous EU subsidies. Also, there were payoffs of other kinds in the '60s and '70s. So it's an issue that has been revived for Polish domestic political consumption, and it's not real. And, I mean, it is real in that they talk about it, but it's a very, it's tendentious, and the Germans are right to ignore it.

So it's an unfortunate and sad piece of the story that I hope will eventually change. And I should say though, the rest of Central and Eastern Europe, the Czechs, the Slovaks, the Balts, the Nordics as well, as you say, have been huge contributors to the war and the war effort, and have been very united with Europe and with NATO as well. So that partly makes up for it. I mean, then, of course, the great exception is Hungary.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, no, really, sure, it's a good reminder. I mean, Poland, they're so anti-Russian, which saves the, in a way, saves us from some of the worst aspects that could happen if with a semi authoritarian, if that's the right term, government. But it is a reminder that governments matter, authoritarianism matters, politics matters, right? I mean, it's not an accident, as we say, that the polls, as you say, are causing much more trouble now and are really problematic. Whereas it's the more, I can put it this way, liberal democratic regimes in the Balts and in the Nordic states where you see real leadership, and I'm really struck by that. I mean, the degree to which 35 and 45 year old prime ministers of Estonia and Finland and so forth are articulating a vision for liberal democracy in Europe, a European vision, but also a transatlantic vision, a very liberal democratic vision in the best sense is really striking to me. I mean, that was not something I saw coming, but it's terrific, I think.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

No, no, I mean, it is partly because those countries, the Nordics feel very much, they look at the map and there's the Baltic Sea and there's Russia, and the Russians have gone out of their way to intimidate them, and they do these games where they fly planes over their territory and so on. And they've worked it out that their security is also under threat. And so there's an enormous amount of Nordic Baltic solidarity, which is great. And there is also generational change there too, in that a previous generation that was wedded to a vision of Russia integrated and our main trading partner now sees that that was an illusion, that sadly, I should say that was an illusion. And that the nature of the Russian state does matter, and being safe against it is going to require an alliance. You're not going to be able to do it by yourself as Finland, or by yourself as Denmark.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, I'm really, maybe I'm just kidding myself, but I am struck that if you think about the 21st century in a very big way and stuff, Europe, which I guess would've sort of said 20 years ago is okay, it's fine, it's a liberal democratic place, a decent place, but would not be much of an engine for defending and strengthening liberal democracy around the world, or even in the region. As you say, they were pretty acquiescent to what was going on in Russia and not terribly interested in taking them on at different times. I really feel that Europe could be much more of a partner with the US than I would've thought, especially if they could work out a few things there in Poland, and then there's the Hungary question, but if Poland and Ukraine would be huge, are big countries.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

Yes, Poland with a pro-European government that was dedicated to some kind of deep relationship with Ukrainian democracy would be a huge powerhouse ally.

BILL KRISTOL:

And Ukraine too itself, right? That's a big country.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

And Ukraine itself. Ukraine, I mean, everything depends on how the war ends and when it ends and so on, so I'm not going to make predictions, but if, following a victory, Ukraine would be one of the most creative, open societies in Europe. They would've just won a huge war. They've shown themselves in all kinds of areas, cyber, military, technology, ingenious and inventive, and they're literally creating new ways to fight and new ways to think about self-defense. They're going to be a really interesting place to invest and an interesting place to be connected to. As I said, much depends on how the war ends and when, but I hope that it is the case.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, so much depends on the actual outcome of the war and one can't overlook that, right? Sort of mad.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

Yeah, of course. Of course.

BILL KRISTOL:

I mean, there's a way in which all these social sciences sites, "Well, the war, that's just a weird variable, but we're going to talk about these deeper forces." but the war matters. What about the US? I mean, when we talked, it was a little ... Biden had done a very good job, I thought, we all thought in the run-up to the war in terms of making, you know, explaining what Putin was going to do and being quite forward leaning on that. But it was unclear, I think two months after the, well, not two months, six months after the Afghanistan withdrawal and so forth, where the Biden administration would be and where the US public would be for that matter. What's your one year in judgment on that?

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

So, I am really grateful that Biden was president during this last year and that he had enough of a, I don't know whether it was kind of Cold War muscle memory or whether it was personal dedication to the idea that US and European security are linked, or whether it was his long experience of traveling back and forth to that region. He did step up to the plate. He did make it clear that we would help Ukraine. And I think they too, at the beginning, were, they were not sure what would happen. And as you remember, the first couple of days in the war, they offered Zelensky a ride out. I think they imagined what they were going to be doing was helping the Ukrainians in exile somewhere, in Poland or somewhere, fight a guerilla war, and this obviously turned into something on a different scale.

I mean, having said that, there have been moments when I wished the administration would move faster. There is a lot of, Biden has made it clear that he doesn't want any Americans fighting there and he doesn't want any NATO troops fighting there. And there is a paranoia about what will the Russians do? Will they react to this weapon or that weapon? What can we give the Ukrainians? And I have worried and continue to worry that the Ukrainians aren't always being given what they need to win in time to use it. And since the decision about the tanks, for example, that was taken a few weeks ago, that was late. Couldn't we have made that decision a few months earlier so that the Ukrainians were training on the tanks, and they could have already been in the field by now? And we seem to be kind of several beats behind almost every time.

But nevertheless, I have to say that I was in the Pentagon not that long ago and I was told by senior people there, "Look, this is the main thing that we think about right now." So they spend a lot of time on it. They do think about it. It's a big operation. I don't think there's anything comparable. I've asked a couple of historians, no one can think of anything. Maybe Lend-Lease during the second World War, but I don't think there's a comparable moment when the US, in particular, has helped another country fight war in this way, at this scale. So, again, as I was with Germany, I'll be nuanced with the US. It's a huge effort. It's amazing. It's incredible. I wish it was moving even faster, but there we are.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, no, it is... People, I am also struck when I talk to people who are pretty close to the actual war effort, the weapons and so forth, people in Europe, I mean, how much we're doing. We're probably doing a little more than we get credit for in some ways, and maybe that's good because you don't want to make it look like a big US operation, so... And one—

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

No, and we're helping them with intelligence. We're helping them in all, as we know, in all kinds of ways. And they know it and are grateful for it. So sometimes they sound a little whiny because the Ukrainians are always asking for more. That's what they have to do. But they do know it, and there is an immense amount of gratitude. And the Europeans know it as well. Actually, the US effort has been pretty inspiring for others. You asked me actually about support inside the US. I've actually seen some polling recently. And as you know, there is a part of the Republican Party and there's a part of the Republican media that's become very anti-Ukrainian and very pro-Russian. Some of it is expressed in this Russian language about the Ukrainians are going to start World War III, that Elon Musk has been using. And some of it is about, oh, they're corrupt and they're taking our money. Whatever the sources of that, and there may be different... It does have an impact, and there is kind of 30% of the population that doesn't fully support the war, maybe is even against it.

One of my worries is that one of the interesting things about the polling, if you track it over time, is that American support for the war goes up when it seems like the Ukrainians are winning. So last fall, in September, when there was this huge take back of territory, the support went up. And as the war goes on a long time and as it becomes more of a quagmire, support falls. Of course, it's the opposite of what should be the case. But I'm just telling you what human psychology is.

And so a lot depends... I think US support and the future of that will depend a lot on what happens over the spring and summer and whether Ukrainians are able to take back territory and begin to make progress again, because I think Americans like the idea of supporting Ukraine, 70% of Americans, but we'll get... I should make with one caveat, which is that in this country, I don't think people directly connect domestic economic problems to the war in the way that they do in Europe.

BILL KRISTOL:

Right.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

In Europe, clear connection between energy prices and the war, for example, because they use Russian gas. And we don't. The US doesn't have a direct dependence on Russia for anything. And so I don't know that we are affected economically by the war in quite the same way. And so for us, it's more about do you support the idea of democracy? Do you care about American influence abroad? Do you want to help Zelensky? The questions are a little bit

different. In Europe, there are some hard economic questions. People say, "We want the war over because we want gas prices to go down." Here we don't have that.

BILL KRISTOL:

It's so much more present. I was struck by that when I was in Berlin, and I'm going to be in Prague a couple of weeks. The war in general, it's just close by and there are a lot of Ukrainians. Germany has a million refugees. Maybe Poland has, I don't know, three million, maybe two and a half million. I've seen different numbers. Everyone knows someone who's hosting them or talking to them and they know people from Kyiv in any place, because since 2014 there's been so much travel back and forth. I think wasn't Ukraine sort of... became a visa-free travel zone for Europe at that point.

So for us, it's impressive that we're doing as much as we are, given that we have so little direct connection in a certain way, right?

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

Yeah.

BILL KRISTOL:

Now, people can say, "Well, it's easy for us. There's no troops, obviously, and no real risk to the US, and we're just spending a lot of money," which— fine. And that's also, I guess, would be a fair qualification of the praise for the US. But for all the people who say, "Oh, the US. The public's so isolationist. They don't understand anything about the world. Especially after Iraq and Afghanistan, they'll never be willing to understand that the fate of other nations far away matters to us." That seems not to be the case, I would say.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

No. It seems not to be the case. And I think people understand the nature of the war. And as I said, Zelensky's appeal to both sides of the political spectrum is real. And people understand that it was an unprovoked invasion, and those who've read enough into it to understand, as I said, what's happening on those occupied territories, understand why it is that we need to help the Ukrainians.

Remember, what the Russians are doing is not only attacking Ukraine. This isn't just about Ukraine. They're also attacking a whole set of ideas and principles and norms. They're attacking the idea of human rights. They're attacking the idea of laws of war. They're attacking the UN convention on genocide. What they're attempting to do is show that all of these things that were part of the world, the US helped build after 1945 and 1989, they're trying to show that all of it's bullshit. They're trying to undermine all of that. And I think there are a lot of people who intuitively understand that. And Putin, not a terribly sympathetic figure for most people, and the Ukrainians have continued that. I know this for a fact, because I talked to them. They spent a lot of time thinking about how to reach Americans, how to talk to Americans. And to some extent, they have success. And I think Americans are responding to that sense of, "Do we want all this to be destroyed? Do we want to turn the clock back and make genocide easy again?" And I think most people don't.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. No. I very much agree with that. Some of my friends think President Biden could do much more to explain this and others could in the administration. And that might be true. It might also be true that just, given our polarized our politics is, maybe it's almost better to be a little bit stepped back from just... Let Zelensky explain it and let others explain it.

But it is... I don't know if people have fully internalized this. If the largest land war in Europe since 1945 ends in a victory or even not a defeat for an unbelievably brutal aggressor who

seeks to destroy a neighboring nation and, as you say, commit war crimes right and left and so forth, I don't know if people fully understand what that would mean for the next five, 10, 25 years around the world incidentally, not just in the rest of Europe.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

No. No. I wrote this recently, because I tried to think through, "Okay, what if we hadn't helped them? What if we weren't there? What would happen?" Well, if the Russians win, we have troops on the border with Poland. We have a direct threat to NATO. They're within a few days driving distance of Berlin, as they were before. So remember, Putin has in his head a memory of a Soviet empire that included East Berlin. And so for him, that's very reasonable.

We have an emboldened China, which looks at this and says, "Right. The Americans lost in Europe. That's their sort of home territory. They're definitely not going to do anything in Asia." So we have a China that's emboldened to take Taiwan or invade Taiwan. You would have literally autocracies all over the world saying, "Right. America's out. America's given up. We don't have to pay any attention to them anymore."

This network of autocrats that I've written about, Russia, China, Iran, Venezuela, the countries that work together would all immediately begin to see their moment and they would begin to understand that this is their time to... They can now ignore... They do a pretty good job of ignoring human rights ideas and ideals anyway, but they could take it many steps farther. And there would be a blowback to American prosperity. There would be a blowback to American prestige. It would have enormous implications over the next years and decades.

And for that reason, again, I repeat I'm glad we had Biden in the White House. I'm glad it was somebody who was willing to take on this cause, even if sometimes I wish we could have gone faster and farther.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. And I think it would strengthen very much, incidentally, the Hungarys or the... the pro-Orban type sentiments in other countries.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

Oh, of course.

BILL KRISTOL:

And certainly here, America First, people forget in the '30s, appeasement was strengthened when it seemed that the Germans were winning. The terrible behavior of the Nazis didn't weaken the forces of appeasement in Britain. And America First was stronger when it seemed hopeless to fight. What was the point of fighting once France had fallen? So the degree to which you would have a world in which we really would retreat instead of our half retreat over the last 20 years and all the implications for that and the implications elsewhere in Europe, I think people just—

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

No. You're right. Domestic political implications. Autocracy is a winner. Democracy is a loser. That would have an echo in our own voting, in our own political patterns. I now think more and more that we underestimate the degree to which the Cold War... At the time, we thought, "America's in the Cold War for Europe, right? We're doing this for others. It's our selfless..."

You know, America in the Cold War was also helping to defend American democracy. By putting democracy at the center of our foreign policy, by making that part of the national self-definition of who we were, we may have protected our own political system much more than we think or certainly than we thought at the time.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

What we do abroad affects how people perceive the country and affects how people behave at home, too.

BILL KRISTOL:

No, very much. Well, that's another conversation we should have. I'm always struck by the civil rights movement was at the height of the Cold War.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

Yeah.

BILL KRISTOL:

And part of the rhetoric was we can't have this at home, because we claim to be standing up for democracy. Well, that wasn't the main thing probably, but it was an important thing. And conversely, incidentally in the '20s when we decided, "Okay, we have nothing to do with any of this. We fought in World War I. We got to get back home," that was the rise of the Klan and so forth. The degree to which illiberalism abroad and tolerating illiberalism abroad can make it more tolerable to be a liberal at home and vice versa is underrated. I think the more conventional view is the kind of libertarian view, which has a certain plausibility of, "Well, it's a republic, not an empire. If you get involved in all these wars, you have a garrison state, you have a national security state, and that hurts our liberties."

But I don't think empirically that's really the case. It's more the opposite. The Cold War was the time of great expansion of liberties and progress in terms of social issues and so forth in the US. And of course, there are instances where you get a backlash and McCarthyism and so forth. But yeah, again, I think the indivisibility of... it was kind of a cliché during the Cold War. Freedom is indivisible. And I think a lot of us said, "Oh, come on. That's not quite right." But it is more right than people maybe acknowledged. Don't you think?

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

Yeah. No, I think there's a relationship. And these things aren't possible to isolate. You can't pick apart the... But definitely, the more I look back at that period or I see how Americans talked about themselves between, I don't know, 1945 and 1989, the more I think the Cold War had a big positive, at least some positive impact.

BILL KRISTOL:

Right. Well, I'll let you go. You're going, I think, to Germany later this week, and you have a lot of... It's a very busy time for you and for all of us. But look, I've appreciated this conversation and what you've done over the last year especially. And we'll have to have another conversation. As you say, the spring/summer or winter/spring could be very important in terms of the actual... what happens on the ground.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

Spring and summer are important.

BILL KRISTOL:

So what's—

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

And I cannot tell you, I can't predict for you right now what will happen, but I know there are a lot of plans being made.

BILL KRISTOL:

Well, let's hope it goes well and let's get together in the fall and have an update. But Anne Applebaum, thanks very much for joining me today.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

Thanks. It was a real pleasure to talk to you again.

BILL KRISTOL:

And thank you for joining us on *Conversations*.