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PETER LAVELLE'S WEEKLY REPORT

• The Red Star: Back To The Future?

This week, the international and local media have again raised the specter of the return to some form of authoritarian rule in Russia. Not long ago, the Soviet anthem was reintroduced, and now the Army is to have its Red Star returned. It can be argued that the media's freedom of expression is under assault as well. Are these examples of President Vladimir Putin (and Russia in general) slipping back into the behavior of the Soviet past? Both Newsweek International's Christian Caryl, in "The Dark Side of Russia," and the Baltimore Sun's Douglas Birch in "Journalists Wary of Putin as Defender of the Press" ponder these issues. The Caryl piece is simply awful; the Birch posting is very interesting and probably as close to the mark as the Western press gets on this very important issue.

My sense is that Putin is not returning to the past, but rather attempting some of the nation-building that affects Russians of every stripe at present. Other icons of the past have been resuscitated as well, including the tsarist-era white-red-and-blue flag that Russia has been using since the 1991 Soviet collapse and the old imperial emblem of the double-headed eagle.

Some commentators have been dismissive of this co-mingling of symbols. However, they are a reflection of the conflicting outlooks existing in Russia. Putin is creating a national ideology for the state. He has only just started, and there should be no doubt his design will be unforeseen. For me, the verdict is still out on the president's manipulation of symbols. Though, if the return of the Red Star is a symbolic substitute for military reform, then Russians will have much more to worry about. No symbol or flag will protect this country's sovereignty; only a lean-and-mean military can do that. Russia has been put on notice, and Putin should know this.

The New York Times and the Washington Post seem to be in competition for the coveted prize called "the Weekly's Penalty Box." The New York Times won out this time around. "Why U.S. Oil Companies and Russian Resources Don't Mix" posted by Neela Banerjee and Sabrina Tavernise, is an example of the new — and completely off-the-mark — conventional wisdom on Russia. The new Russia-U.S. relationship is not "all about oil." (I am struck by how Western writers have become quasi-Marxist economic determinists since the collapse of the Soviet Union.)

Energy relations may become an important cornerstone of this relationship, but, as this article points out, this can only happen if Putin secures Russia as an investor-friendly environment. The new conventional wisdom does not take into account the most important issue: Keeping Soviet-made weapons of mass destruction under lock and key. The Bush folks have started a chain of events that makes the poorly guarded arsenals of the former Soviet Union (and their underpaid overseers) desirable targets for the same people who seized the Moscow theater in October.

Another issue that is slowing pulling the United States and Russia together is something that is politically incorrect to mention. It is unclear if the Bush people are aware just how much U.S. foreign policy is becoming part of the prediction of the "Clash of Civilizations" claimed by Samuel Huntington to be in the cards. Viewing the joint press conference in St. Petersburg during the summit worried me. Putin was smiling ear to ear listening to George W. talk about "international terrorism." Russia's war against terror is not the same war America is fighting, but that may change soon. The sad fact is that Russia can't fight the same war, because its military is woefully unprepared.

Two academic postings caught my eye this week. Both Richard Rose of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in "Putin's Support: A Mile Wide, but How Deep" and Daniel Treisman of Foreign Affairs in "Russia Renewed?" look at what makes Putin's presidency different — or indistinguishable — from that of his predecessor.

Rose examines what makes Russia's political culture tick, while Treisman is quite dismissive of what most claim has been accomplished during the Putin presidency. If you have the time, both are worth the time invested.

While many Western pundits express extreme concern about censorship in Russia, Ajay Goyal of The Russia Journal is actually fighting for freedom of expression. For the reader who would like to go beyond the platitudes of theory and the hypothetical, read Goyal's in "British Airways and the White Page" to learn of a struggle in the trenches — in confrontation with a major Western business conglomerate doing business in Russia.

For a comprehensive review of this week's Russian press, have a look at WPS' political forecast by Mavra Kosichkina — it is always entertaining. And, starting this week, Ekaterina Larina's review of Russian politics will be included in the Weekly's suggested postings. Her insights are as good as it gets.

Art Buchwald has been writing political op-ed pieces longer than I have been alive. His "Russian-American Friendship," posted in the Korea Herald, puts Russia's path of political change in perspective. He reminds us how easy it is to forget — and to laugh at ourselves.

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Top Israeli newspaper exposes olive 'robbery'

By Michael Matza

The Philadelphia Inquirer

JAT, Israel — Salem Watid, 29, looked up from the deserted cafe and cast his eyes down the road to the West Bank border.

"They take too much trees from the West Bank," said Watid, an Israeli Arab, pointing to a deep-rooted olive orchard in the nearby Palestinian village of Zeita, where rows of trees recently were removed.

A gash in the coffee-colored earth marked the line where Israel is building a security fence to keep attackers out. Israeli soldiers guard the site as bulldozers prepare the ground for a barrier that will stretch more than 100 miles along what once was Israel's eastern border, before the country captured the West Bank from attacking Jordanian forces in the 1967 Six Day War.

In some places, the fence's 165-foot-wide security zone will swerve from the 1967 line a half-mile or more into Palestinian land. The defense ministry says those who lose access to their property will be compensated if they can prove ownership — but many Palestinians lack deeds and are losing their land.

Others, even with deeds, may be losing their trees.

The destruction of Palestinian olive trees in the name of security has long been an issue, as Israeli forces frequently uproot groves suspected of serving as cover for snipers.

Now Israel's largest-circulation daily newspaper, Yedioth Ahronoth, is reporting that 1,000 or more Palestinian olive trees, many of them more than 100 years old, have been sold to nursery owners in Israel in what the paper calls "a large robbery operation."

"By a cautious estimate," the paper said in an investigative report by staffers who posed as buyers, "at least 20,000 olive trees have been uprooted in recent months. Some are destroyed in the process."

The article noted that some trees were returned to their Palestinian owners to be replanted. But, it said, "a great many are sold to nursery owners in Israel. ... The [Palestinian] owners, obviously, don't get a red cent."



AN ELDERLY Palestinian woman gestures as she shows her destroyed Gaza Strip farm. Now Israel's largest-circulation daily paper has come out on the side of the Palestinians, reporting that Israel has been selling uprooted olive trees.

Olive trees provide a cash crop critically important to the ailing economies of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Easy to transplant and hard to kill, they also symbolize Palestinian identity and aspirations.

Yedioth Ahronoth quoted one unnamed nursery owner who said he sold Palestinian trees for \$125 to \$5,200, depending on their size and age. Older, gnarled trees are prized by landscapers for their beauty.

The Israeli Defense Ministry, which supervises the fence construction, said Tuesday that it would investigate the allegations.

"We condemn the phenomenon discussed in the report of trees being stolen, and we are carrying out an internal investigation to examine whether there is something to the claims in the article," the ministry said in a statement faxed to the news agency Reuters.

"The ministry pays contractors for the uprooting and replanting, and in their contract there is no clause that allows for trade in the trees. If there is, it is criminal activity that will be investigated," the statement continued.

The defense ministry told reporters that most olive trees removed so far had been replanted in areas selected by the Palestinian owners.

If they refused to cooperate, the ministry said, the trees were temporarily replanted, watered

for two weeks and left for anyone to take.

Yedioth Ahronoth reporters, hiding their true identities, said they approached a foreman for Ahim Ben Rahamim, one of five private contractors working on the project, and asked to purchase 100 trees. "No problem, we have as many as you want," the man reportedly said.

The paper then quoted Ahmed el-Rafik, a farmer from Zeita, who said the trees offered for sale actually belonged to him and were planted by his grandfather. "I'm 73, and they were here when I was born," el-Rafik is quoted as saying.

Shimon Ben Rahamim, who co-owns Ahim Ben Rahamim with his brother, was also quoted in the newspaper.

"How many do you want, big or small?" he reportedly told the masquerading reporters. "No problem. Talk to my foreman."

Later, in a telephone interview with The Philadelphia Inquirer, Ben Rahamim denied the allegations.

"The whole story is a fabrication. We haven't sold one tree ever. Trees that belong to the locals are trimmed and then relocated on Palestinian land. The people who wrote that story, they're all from Peace Now — they all hate Israelis. 'The trees I offered to sell them were from Kibbutz Magal,' which is inside Israel, he said. 'Some of them I even gave away for free.' ■

U.K., France agree on immigration

The Associated Press

LONDON — A refugee center that served as a stepping stone for illegal immigration to Britain will close at the end of December, four months earlier than planned, the British and French governments announced Monday.

At a joint press conference in London, Home Secretary David Blunkett and his French counterpart Nicolas Sarkozy said the Sangatte refugee camp would close Dec. 30.

In return, Blunkett said Britain would grant working visas to up to 1,000 Iraqi Kurds at the camp. He said some Afghan refugees at the camp who have family connections in Britain would be allowed to enter the country.

There are about 2,200 people in the camp, which has been a major source of disagreement between Britain and France.

London has been pressing French officials to shut the camp in order to discourage illegal immigration.

Sarkozy said France would assume responsibility for the remainder of the refugees at the camp. About 40 percent of the refugees at Sangatte are Afghans, many others are Iraqi Kurds.

The Red Cross center at Sangatte was due to close April 2003, according to an earlier French-British agreement.

Many refugees try to sneak across the channel from the center, risking their lives to stow away on freight trains heading through the Channel Tunnel. ■