

## Putin's playthings

BY ALEXANDER WOOLFSON

Publicly, last month's joint statement by the UK, France, the US and Germany in response to the poisoning of Sergei Skripal and his daughter was presented as a strong display of unity. However, the document's omissions, both in terms of content and signatories, matter far more than the circumscribed area on which the four countries were able to find common ground. Few people, apart from the inner cabal of Labour Party leadership, would find the statement's acknowledgement that Russia was behind the first use of a nerve agent in Europe since the Second World War and that it "threatens the security of us all", as controversial.

Nato Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg's response was to express support for the UK, while stating that this was not grounds for invoking Nato's Article V, which would demand a response from all members. This was a diplomatic sleight of hand. While he was correct that any response must be proportionate, there are steps short of Article V that Nato could have taken.

The response to what is merely the latest in a succession of Russian atrocities, stretching from Crimea to Syria, should have been to invoke Nato's Article IV to "consult together whenever, in the opinion of any of them, the territorial integrity, political independence or security of any of the parties is threatened."

This would have sent a strong message of unity and triggered a special session to speed up a co-ordinated Nato response. Indeed, Theresa May's carefully chosen language in her parliamentary statement appeared to be intended to pave the way towards such international action in response to what she characterised as a state-directed attack on the UK.

Instead, the joint statement did not come from Nato and it papered over the significant diplomatic gulf about how to tackle Russia that has divided Nato members since the invasion of Crimea in 2014. This left Mrs May in the curious position of announcing that she would take the issue to the UN, where Russia has a veto on the Security Council.

Mustering even the support for this seemingly self-evident statement proved challenging, following initial reluctance by the US and France publicly to blame Russia. Revealing the depth of disunity between Nato mem-

*Jens Stoltenberg: Could have been tougher on Russia*



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bers, however momentarily, is exactly the effect Putin hoped for. It totally negates the purpose of the joint statement and was apparent to even the most useful of idiots, Jeremy Corbyn, while he grasped for any explanation of events that didn't directly implicate Russia.

As Putin celebrates re-election he can be confident that Nato has failed to meet his challenge to the integrity of a member state, a blow to the collective security of all. This portends future obstacles to credible collective action, a signal only likely to embolden Moscow further.

## Penny foolish

BY CHRISTOPHER FILDES

The decimal penny's review should write itself: this coin is not worth picking up in the street. As a store of value and a medium of exchange, it is useless. It costs the Royal Mint more to make than it will buy—or would buy, in any shop that hasn't phased it out. Some of this coinage is thrown away, some accumulates in bottles to be palmed off on charities, who would grumble if we did away with it. Why don't we just let it die a natural death?

Philip Hammond has hastened to put his review behind him. Yet it is less than half a century since this penny was bright and new. Out went the traditional penny—the D (from the Latin: denarius) in £sd, which stood for pounds, shillings and pence. In came, at last, a modern decimal currency.

Plantagenet Palliser, Trollope's Chancellor, had vainly dreamt of it. He could not make the farthing—a neat little coin, worth a quarter of a penny—fit into it. His successor gave us a coin without a plural: 3d had been threepence, but 3p became three pee. Worse still, its purchasing power drained away. The change had weakened our mental resistance to rising prices, and within five years inflation had reached 26 per cent.

Within the Bank of England, an unsung hero called John De Loynes saw this coming. He had stabilised the Gambia's currency around a four-shilling coin, with two crocodiles chasing each other round the rim. Gambians, he thought, would like to bet on one crocodile catching the other up. They were used to a four-shilling unit, they had no need for a decimal currency—and, in any case, inflation was decimalising the world's currencies quite fast enough without central bankers joining in.

This went down like a bad oyster with his seniors at the Bank. How dare he cast doubt on Britain's monetary modernisation? But inflation had already solved Palliser's problem by seeing off the farthing, the threepenny bit and the "silver" sixpence followed, and today the shilling, in its new guise as a five-pee piece, is the lowest coin of any practical use. How long will it last at today's rate of inflation? Don't expect the next review to tell us.

## Dürer's diversion

BY JONATHAN GAISMAN

"An influential artist should not devote himself to one style only, but should practise all manners and styles." So wrote Albrecht Dürer, the greatest of all German Renaissance artists, and the quotation captures the theme of the monumental exhibition in the Palazzo Reale, Milan, *Dürer e il Rinascimento tra Germania e Italia*, which runs to June 24.

There is an 1828 painting by Friedrich Overbeck, to which this title alludes: it shows the symbolic embrace ►

of two young women, each representing and set against the contrasting landscapes of their national cultures. Whereas it was traditionally the Germans who looked southwards to the land where the lemon trees blossomed, this show more unusually seeks to claim Dürer's place among the Italians, and to demonstrate that there are innumerable influences across the Alps in both directions.

The artist paid a long visit to Italy in 1505-1507, and almost certainly made an earlier one too. These trips south in some way mirror the ventures at least some way north conjectured as having been made by Antonello da Messina, as a result of which he came under the influence of van Eyck and imported into Italy the Flemish model of portraiture.

What the Milan exhibition points up is the degree to which Dürer's style was modified by the influence of the Italian masters, not least Giovanni Bellini whom he met in Venice ("very old, but still the best in painting"). The impression with which one is left is of two almost completely contrasting outputs in Dürer's work, and sometimes a barely integrated combination of the two. Typical of the pre-Italian phase is the 1490 portrait of the artist's father from the Uffizi, whose piercing realism—the stubble, the wrinkles, the arthritic hands—is purely Northern European.

The softening of the artist's technique, which is already apparent in the portraits of 1505, is most striking in *Christ among the Doctors* (1506), a work which he boasted to have completed in five days. Unlike his immediate models, Carpaccio and Alvise Vivarini, Dürer does not make Jesus's head the focal point, but rather places centre stage the complex interplay of four hands. Though our attention is certainly arrested by the painting's remarkable composition, one can understand why Wölfflin described it as a "mere curiosity". What the curator Bernard Aikema refers to as a "skilful blend" might strike others as an uneasy amalgam of different traditions. Christ's head appears to be neither one thing nor the other; the surrounding figures on our right veer from a Boschian grotesque to a deeply-bearded saint redolent of Bellini's meditative divines in the church of San Zaccharia, while the figure to the extreme right anticipates the energy of the youthful Titian.

Similar thoughts recur as one walks through the succeeding rooms of the exhibition. When, for example, one compares the portrait of a young man from 1506 (Genoa) with the clergyman Dürer painted ten years later

(Washington DC), here placed side by side, it is as if one is looking at the work of two different artists. Very fine though the earlier painting is, the later work reflects a homecoming in more ways than one. It is, of course, impossible to wish away the existence of any creation of the master, but it is hard to see the productions which came from the period of his deep immersion in the art of the Italian Renaissance as anything other than a compromise—a diversion of the main current—of his extraordinary genius.

## Unsafe space

BY TAMARA BERENS

Winning the battle for free speech on university campuses in the UK is integral to maintaining the founding liberal values of these institutions. The war against free speech is currently being waged by a radical, organised minority of Marxist students, who are willing to use violence and disruption to dominate the campus environment. We students can—and must—fight back using our own methods.

At King's College London I have faced multiple aggressive or physically violent protests since beginning my studies. On March 5, a group of "Antifa" (so-called anti-fascist) thugs punched their way through the university's security to shut down a speaking event with the Israeli-born libertarian Yaron Brook and YouTuber Carl Benjamin (aka Sargon of Akkad). The masked group were working with an amalgam of far-left student societies, including Action Palestine and Justice for Cleaners, who had organised a protest online the previous day demanding the speakers stay "off campus". Over the course of the evening a window was smashed, two female members of staff were punched, a male security guard was hospitalised and the speakers were silenced.

This is the second instance in two years where violence has been waged to this extent on campus. Last time, university students had to escape via underground tunnels after fire alarms were set off in protest of a former Israeli Shin Bet official speaking to students. This time, the campus was evacuated after smoke bombs were thrown at several locations. The university administration's response has remained the same, however: rather than punishing those responsible for the violence, it has acted to restrict the very societies being targeted by such illegal behaviour through imposing measures such as Safe Spaces.

The paternalistic response to such violence means that, through policies such as Safe Space, the imposition of independent chairs and limits on attendees, the main obstacle to free speech on campus is the university administration itself. The university refuses to take steps against the violent individuals acting collectively within student societies to stifle free expression on campus. Instead, it has banned its own lecturer in neurobiology, Dr Adam Perkins, from speaking on "the scientific importance" of free speech. Such actions have a devastating impact on the quality of debate on campus and only embolden the extremist no-platform brigade to further disrupt any event organised by societies they disagree with.

Such adversity has nonetheless driven students who believe in liberty to work harder at advancing free speech on campus. We have launched a campaign to abolish Safe Spaces at the student union by making the ideological and practical case against the fallacy of a Safe Space and gaining the broad support of the student body in doing so. While we will never resort to punches or smoke bombs to further our aims, we can and will make a difference using facts, debate and the merits of liberty. ■

Detail of "*Christ among the doctors*", 1506, by Dürer

