Introduction

Kirsten Malfrid Flagstad (1895-1962) was, without a doubt, her era's greatest voice and most significant interpreter of Wagner. She was famous across the whole American continent and in Europe, but less well-known in her home country, Norway. Richard Wagner's biographer, music critic Ernest Newman, heard Flagstad sing at Queen's Hall, London, as early as 1936. He wrote in *The Sunday Times* that hers was an exceptional voice, a combination of purity and warmth. Like sunlight on the snow, it was clear and luminous. Her ease amazed him. She never appeared to have to reach for a high note, she could just glide into it like a bird in flight. Others describe the sound as like the sun shining over meadows, peaks and glaciers. Jessye Norman associated it with molten gold on black velvet, while Elisabeth Schwarzkopf experienced it as having the dimensions of a cosmic mother, embracing the universe.

Flagstad was born with musical genius and perfect pitch. But, she was somewhat tone deaf when it came to the world around her and the nature of the historical moment she lived through. Her life and career unfolded in large part through a dark time for Europe: before, during and after World War Two. This biography places her life, and the lives of her musical contemporaries, in this historical context, caught in the tension that arose between art and politics.

Flagstad's fate was often in step with the content of the Wagner operas she sang, something the text explores from an in-depth, psychological perspective. She came close to being trapped by Nazism's politicisation of Wagner's works and characters. The composer used ancient Nordic myths as the raw material for his operas. What do these myths convey, exactly, and how was their archaic wisdom reinterpreted and used in the service of Nazi ideology? What were the consequences for Jewish singers and musicians in Germany from 1933? What were the consequences for culture in general? These are the questions the book explores.

In 1934, a contact at the Metropolitan in New York saved Flagstad from a career in Bayreuth. She was permanently engaged at the Metropolitan from 1935 – 1941. It's claimed that she saved the opera house from bankruptcy and at the same time renewed opera as an art form in America. Bayreuth had their eye on her in 1934 as a future Isolde and Brunhilda. However, continuing to work with the German house could have had

dire consequences. The Valkyrie's dazzling supernatural character was fostered by Hitler's regime as a war goddess for Nazism and it would prove difficult to separate the performer from this conceit.

From 1935 until 1940, Wagner was not politicised in the same way in America. The American public experienced his operas outside of the German and Nazi context, as purely mythological dramas, cloaked in formidable music.

The composer's genius anchored the works at a universal level. Wagner's personal ideology cast a dark shadow over them. This shadow was detected and incorporated into the Nazi project by Hitler and his collaborators. Flagstad was first caught up in it in 1940, when her Wagner repertoire was classed as treasonous by the Norwegian ambassador to America and by the Foreign Office. German now rang out as the language of the enemy in the ears of representatives of occupied countries. A more threatening encounter with this perception came about in 1941 when she left America and returned home to occupied Norway. Waiting for her was a husband who was a member of the National Socialist Party (NS), engaged in extensive business dealings with the occupying power.

The portrayal of Flagstad as the enemy, which was made by leading men in the Norwegian foreign office, with Wilhelm af Munthe von Morgenstierne, the Norwegian ambassador to the USA, at the helm, was never a reality. They charged her publicly and unjustly of being a Nazi sympathiser, a war profiteer, of singing for Hitler and entertaining the Third Reich's occupying forces.

She was also implicated in a conspiracy theory around the creation, in 1945, of an underground organisation called 'The Economic Ring'. Flagstad was suspected of assisting the group by holding the organisation's funds, camouflaged as her own private fortune. She was going to withdraw and move them when she managed to get overseas after the war. This was part of the reasoning behind the illegal freeze on her assets, which remained in place until 1950, and was used to justify denying her permission to leave the country until December 1946.

A police investigation led by the Norwegian attorney general, Andreas Aulie, in 1950, concluded that there was no evidence for the existence of 'The Economic Ring'. The concept was invented by two Gestapo agents used by the Norwegian secret police as informants and collaborators from 1945 to 1948. These revelations cast serious doubts on the credibility of both the prosecuting authorities and the police.

The systematic post-war harassment of Norway's premier vocal artist is documented in detail through a series of letters, marked as 'confidential' in the foreign office's archives. The expressed goal was to prevent her from leaving Norway and from carrying on in her profession in Europe and America. Her accusers fed false information to the American authorities, misinformed the Norwegian royal family, planted fake news stories in foreign presses and had corrupt dealings with elements of the Norwegian media.

The campaign was successful and created the most all-encompassing controversy that any artist has endured in the USA since World War Two. It stirred up thousands of Americans who believed what the papers said about Kirsten Flagstad. The leaders of the Metropolitan believed it too, and they did not invite her back onto their stage until 1951. For several years, Flagstad lived in constant fear of physical attack by furious individuals or demonstrating crowds, at times requiring police protection.

The harassment failed to break her as an artist, but the lengthy victimisation did irreparable damage to both her body and her soul. The bitterness of her will, where she sought to erase her own memory from Norwegian society, sends a clear message. She knew that despite her efforts, her numerous recordings would leave a long and significant global legacy in music's history.

The book is written with an international audience in mind. It recounts musical life in different countries and opera lovers and music institutions around the world will find it equally enlightening. The biography that follows is the result of over twenty years of research and includes pioneering work with previously unexplored and overlooked archives.

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Opening night at the Metropolitan

The report in *Words and Music* magazine describes a grand premiere. There was no sign of the alleged American depression when the Metropolitan opened its door for a new season. Driving slowly, three endless rows of exclusive products from General Motors, in perfect union with different coloured taxis of all makes and models, approached each of the historic theatre's three entrances. Every vehicle carried with it a quota of hats, minks, sables and silver foxes. Experienced photographers picked up the scent and soon identified which hats and furs obscured the best subjects. The opening night of a new opera season was still America's number one show – in good times and in bad.

The times had changed, and so had musical tastes. Previously the exclusive audience at the Metropolitan's premiere would have been invited to enjoy a feast of French or Italian operas, but audiences now came to hear Wagner's *Die Walküre*. Perceived on earlier runs as a vacuous production, it had now become the Opera House's most potent box-office success. Not for thirty-six years had a German opera been selected to open the season. People arrived at their boxes long before they traditionally would have – previously it would have been at some point during the second act. They liked Wagner so much that they didn't even want to miss the overture. The Metropolitan audience had not displayed such cultural sophistication prior to Flagstad's arrival.

The star herself dreaded the people who waited to meet her after her performances. That's when she had the need to shut herself in, drink champagne and play game after game of patience. After every performance her part repeated itself in her head, over and over again, it plagued her. She required total silence, and not a soul was to disturb her, only then would the singing stop and leave her in peace. She was an instrument that needed time alone to digest the music's reverberations.

Christmas Eve, 1939: Kirsten Flagstad sang for USA radio audiences to mark the beginning of Christmas. She took over an American festive ritual which had been Ernestine Schumann-Heink's role. Heink was a renowned alto, and was affectionately known as 'Mother America'. She was also called the last Titan of the vocal arts. NBC had never asked any other singers to perform this honour, but in the last minutes of Christmas Eve, which pass though midnight into Christmas morning, they presented Kirsten Flagstad, who sang *Silent Night, Holy Night* and delivered a Christmas greeting.

After the recording, she drove back to the Dorset Hotel with McArthur. Safely back in her room she flung open the balcony doors and cried out into the night:

Where is my daughter? Where is my daughter?

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Symbiotic entanglement

Her daughter's resolute rejection had awoken Flagstad's trauma and her own separation anxiety came to the fore. Patterns of behaviour are created through generations. Her grandmother had lost three girls before Flagstad's mother was born. It is seems highly probable that she didn't dare bond with her fourth daughter,

for fear of losing her also. Either way, fear must have had a powerful effect on the symbiotic phase their relationship. Maja never allowed for this symbiosis with her own babies. Shortly after giving birth she went back to work, and was rarely home.

This lack created an underlying insecurity in Flagstad which she compensated for with a rigid personality, a pedantic sense of order and the immediate execution of every obligation. Now these defences began to crumble. Her inner self, which she had kept hidden, could no longer be subdued. She was quite helpless in her intimate relationships, of which she understood very little. The absence of an early attachment can be traced though her lifelong inability to reach out to others. She rarely asked for help and didn't talk about herself. She didn't like to listen to other people's problems, and found physical and emotional closeness uncomfortable.

This kind of symbiotic trauma leads to symbiotic entanglements, relationships where neither party gets the love, compassion, closeness and support that they need. Even so, they can't manage to separate, despite all the conflict that ensues. Such entanglements lead to continuous battles within a relationship and a relationship system. For Kirsten Flagstad and her daughter this was the case from the very beginning. When they tried to get close to each other, it ended with painful rejections and ruptures. They were propelled towards each other by a fear of loneliness and isolation, but the daughter still rejected the mother when intimacy became a possibility. It was too threatening and too demanding.

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New Flagstad – Morgenstierne drama behind the scenes

Bodanzky's departure may have made Flagstad even more insecure and withdrawn. McArthur played a supporting role in every way, but his position as the Flagstad-Johansen's adopted son meant that the provision of paternal security in her life now rested solely with her husband, who was in Norway. The stage was a safe space, a sanctuary, and she still couldn't understand why anyone would insist on meeting her as a private citizen, off stage. Morgenstierne had not given up hope despite her earlier rejections.

The next time he and Flagstad met was at a concert in Washington on 14th February, 1940. McArthur was conducting The National Symphony. She had overridden her instincts and, against her will, invited Morgenstierne to join her backstage during the interval. He probably shouldn't have accepted, because the meeting was a fiasco. It had not passed Flagstad by that Morgenstierne had hired the Metropolitan for a

concert to welcome the Crown Prince and Princess, without inviting her to perform. When they met, both parties were concealing emotional dynamite. McArthur recalls that Morgenstierne came in with three or four other men. The first thing they did on entry was light up cigarettes, a total lapse of decorum in a singer's dressing room. This also ignited Flagstad. She hated smoke, which aggravated her sensitive airways. McArthur quickly perceived the explosive situation and asked the men to stub out their cigarettes. The rebuke triggered a strong reaction from Morgenstierne, who immediately left the room. He surely felt rejected and insulted, Flagstad felt invaded and disrespected.

Why did he not keep his distance? With what we know about Morgenstierne's earlier experiences of rejection by Flagstad, his continued approaches appear almost self-destructive. Afterwards, Flagstad came to hear that Morgenstierne considered her unfriendly. Why was he pursuing her, what did he really want? She did not intend to enter into any kind of relationship which gave the Norwegian minister power over her. McArthur writes that Flagstad, in her straightforward and tremendously stubborn way, saw herself as the centre of the universe, with the right to dismiss whoever she chose to. She hated that someone would try and bask in her glory, her aversion, no doubt, started in childhood, through her relationship with her narcissistic mother.

As an artist, Flagstad was dependent on being able to devote total concentration to the demands of the music, and her long career had only increased this need. It is incredible that, just as she was due to return to the stage to sing a new act, Morgenstierne and the other dignitaries lit their cigarettes and felt they needed to engage her in distracting small talk. We see in this encounter the deep antagonism between two perfectionists, a diplomat and an artist. It's no wonder the relationship between Flagstad and Morgenstierne plunged into hostility and suspicion.

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Parsifal – a vision of the cosmic Christ

At the Metropolitan it was traditional to perform Wagner's opera *Parsifal* every Good Friday, fitting as it is a sacred drama, loosely based on a legend from the Middle Ages about the Holy Grail, the chalice that caught the blood of the Saviour. The composer referred to it as an initiation ritual for the stage, which he only wanted to be performed at Bayreuth. When the Metropolitan staged *Parsifal* for the first time, in 1903, Cosima Wagner objected, but she didn't win her court case. In 1933, Hitler raised the issue with Winifred

Wagner. He wanted to ensure that *Parsifal* was returned to Bayreuth, according to Wagner's wishes. She was more pragmatic about it, Hitler did not have the authority to ban other countries from performing the work, and in light of this, she didn't believe it was a very good idea.

The content of *Parsifal* seems far removed from everything Hitler stood for, even so he wanted to base his religion on the work. A speculative understanding of this is that he simply interpreted the symbolic use of blood through the prism of 'Blut und Boden', where blood signified heredity and 'race', linked to native soil and territory. Did he really think that 'Aryan blood' was contained in the grail? Confining the opera to a provincial German town goes against the vision of the work itself.

The central symbol of the opera is the grail, filled with the Saviour's blood, which is kept in the Hall of the Grail. The old king, Amfortas, is suffering and close to death and can no longer carry out his role as protector of the Holy Sacrament, which is administered every Good Friday and renews the whole world. The tradition is under threat, as the protector is dying. Only a holy fool, Parsifal, enlightened by compassion, can take over the old king's role. We also meet a woman, Kundry, who is portrayed as part primitive woman, part witch, degraded, abused and cast out by the Grail Knights and by society.

Like all works of art, *Parsifal* is open to a wealth of interpretations. A central theme in the work is reflected by the promise of a renewed spirituality, developing holistically. Christianity's historic restraint, symbolised by the old king, implies a powerful spiritual handicap. That which belongs to the past, has no redemptive power in the here and now. As long as a redeeming God is bound up in a specific era, he loses all his symbolic value as the eternal archetypes take on new historical guises, contingent on psychological and material changes to living conditions.

Jesus is said to have had a singular ability to empathise with other people. He is thought to have declared that that which is done to others, is also done to him. Many significant religious founders have held up compassion as a central element of spiritual development, but none have gone so far as Christ. By treating others like a manifestation of himself, he lives up to his role as the bearer of humanity's self, the solar son of man, the cosmic Christ. In this way he can be reborn in each individual human. Within this lies Christianity's central message and regenerative power.

This is the vision that Richard Wagner is first and foremost touching on in his drama. In the opera, the undervalued and ostracised feminine element, nature, is also returned to the spiritual. Wagner wrote the work

when he was approaching old age, the lion in him had lost its claws, and his wildness was almost tamed. The music throughout is melodious and sublime, and is experienced by many as akin to a church service. It is traditional the world over not to applaud at the end of the first act, as it ends on a scene of Holy Communion. The opera is usually performed just before or in the middle of Easter. At the Metropolitan, the 1935 performance was staged on Wednesday 17th April, the Wednesday before Maundy Thursday, the Christian celebration of Jesus' Last Supper with the Apostles. It played again two days later, on Good Friday. Flagstad performed as Kundry in both instances.

Kundry is not an easy role, and she only had eleven days to rehearse. Melchior sang the eponymous role, Parsifal, but received little attention in the papers, which were full of Kirsten Flagstad. Her Kundry was hailed as reinvigorating an old tradition, doing something totally new with the role. She allowed the audience to experience the timeless spirit of the pilgrim, forever out of place. She emphasised Kundry's nameless tragedy, grief and loneliness, portrayed her as a woman who symbolises nature and life itself. A number of people queued for four and a half hours to witness the production.

Flagstad recalled that she was exhausted after *Parsifal,* which was her last opera of the season. In the first act, Kundry prostrates herself on the stage, and to her great horror, Flagstad woke up suddenly on the stage floor, having nodded off for a moment. She immediately got back into character. The role was tragic, but she was happy. Something immense and inexplicable flowed through her. Perhaps it was the proximity to the sacred, the metaphysical dimension of the work, that she was experiencing. *New York Daily News* asserted that Flagstad was a gift from God to Gatti-Casazza for his last season as director at the Metropolitan, but they also made the point that it was the audience which discovered her.

Diva worship

After *Parsifal* she travelled directly to NBC's radio studio in Detroit, where the four thousand-strong audience came as quite a shock. The General Motors' Choir and Symphony Orchestra also performed, with Flagstad as soloist. After the performance, NBC had arranged a meeting with the director of General Motors, where Flagstad was urged to visit his home and meet his family.

She protested, loudly; her train to New York was leaving in an hour. Besides which, she just wanted to be alone, she hated being approached before, during and after performances and concerts. Privately, she only

wanted to spend time with friends. She did not understand that the interest in her went beyond her performances.

She was naive to say the least. Flagstad, in the course of a few months, had become a celebrity, on a par with a rock star. She had engendered hopeless projection and was viewed as almost god-like. The director insisted she accept the invitation and she relented. At top speed she greeted his family, a group of over two hundred people. No one said a word to her, she was just expected to smile and shake hands.

What is actually going on when famous people meet and greet their assembled followers? Fans project an illusion of divinity onto the figure they worship, the meeting and the squeeze of the hand transfers their fantasy back to them. They become part of it, as the General Motors director's family did, experiencing their meeting with the world's greatest singer as a brush with the divine. They could now say to their friends: 'I met her', the implication being, I have become part of her. This phenomenon is driven by powerful forces of the unconscious, a hint of primitive magic hangs over it, and it constantly repeats itself within cults and idol worship.

This transfer also does something to the person who is idolised, they can become trapped in a role. Within the master-student relationship in spiritual teaching traditions and within psychoanalytic theory and praxis, positive and negative transference are consciously exploited as tools to liberate students and patients. When the phenomenon plays out collectively, positively, as idolisation, or negatively, as harassment, we are most often blindly unaware of it. And so it loses its liberatory aspect. It can bind people to illusions and lead to destruction and ruin.

Could Kirsten Flagstad have prevented these sorts of 'lies' being created about her? It would have demanded a level of self-awareness beyond her capability. She would have needed to eradicate her ego, she would have needed to recognise motivations as well as the mechanisms of the market forces that played out around her. Consequently, she would have needed to deny the press any access to her private life, or have used any interactions exclusively to refute untruths. Perhaps she would also have needed to leave the stage, but even then, her legend would have remained intact. The question is, is it even possible to avoid this kind of thing, can positive and negative transference ever be altogether eliminated?

The train that was to carry hundreds of passengers from Detroit to New York was delayed by forty minutes, thanks to Kirsten Flagstad's meet and greet. A police escort, with motorbikes and sirens, carried her

like a queen through the city to the railway station. In the midst of the commotion, privately, Flagstad was quite alone. Her husband was gone, and she was surrounded by a crowd of admirers, colleagues, servants and assistants. She found some support from maestro Bodanzky, who, early on, became a father figure of sorts.

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Norway – the Proto-Germanic cradle?

She returned home to a country which had changed radically. The elected government and the Royal House had fled, the Reich's Commissariat had moved in and taken over the governing of Norway. The German occupying forces quickly set up a propaganda headquarters distributing public information and cultural material nationally. This was led by Joseph Goebbels' earlier press secretary, SS-Oberführer Georg Wilhelm Müller. He was given the task of developing a 'bond of friendship between Germany and Norway'. Goebbels' hope was that Norwegians could be won over by, among other things, lending out Germany's foremost musicians, singers, orchestras and ensembles to the country. The German command had received clearly earmarked resources to present the best of the best of German art and culture to Norwegians. Hitler had personally decided that three million Reichsmarks should be put aside for cultural propaganda in Norway.

The Nazi ideology, as espoused by Heinrich Himmler in particular, had fantastical ideas about Norwegians and Norwegian culture. Himmler was one of the most powerful men in the Third Reich, Adolf Hitler's right-hand man and one of the architects of the Holocaust. He saw Norway as the 'Proto-Germanic cradle' and believed that the population were prime examples of the Germanic race. Blonde, blue-eyed Norwegians, direct descendants of the Vikings, were not a diluted nation. With such convictions he embarked on several 'race safaris' in the country, to study the 'racially pure' Norwegians who lived in remote valleys. He believed that in these places, the soul of the race was left unsullied by foreign elements. He claimed to hear the German race's primitive voice in Nordic folk music. Himmler's interest left a pernicious taint on Norwegian folk music, and national symbols were misleadingly linked to Nazism and racism.

The Nazi fascination with Norway and the Nordic countries meant the occupiers initially went easy on the civilian population. The plan was to win them over, rather than conquer them, and then begin their integration into Germany's advanced civilisation.

Culture oils the wheels of war

The working class were to be raised up to enjoy new heights of culture. Art, which had previously been reserved for the bourgeoisie, was now to be made available to those of lesser means. The leisure organisation, 'Kraft durch Freude', was established when Hitler came to power in 1933. The organisation bought up large numbers of opera and theatre tickets. They also organised classical music concerts in factory workers' lunch breaks, conducted by leading figures like Furtwängler. Culture became an important part of the Nazi's political propaganda, and following in its wake was the censor.

In 1939, Hitler asked Winifred Wagner what would happen to the festivals. She felt they should shut them down, as they had done when the First World War broke out. Hitler responded that he did not want to lose Bayreuth's traditions nor for the Opera house to deteriorate materially. Winifred thought it would be impossible to continue, since the staff would be called up to active duty. In September 1939, Hitler declared that all workers at Bayreuth were to be exempt from military service, from May through August. Winifred asked where they would find their audience; workers in the war industry were either at their duties or did not have the time nor the money to come to Bayreuth. Hitler wanted to gather injured and decorated soldiers, officers, medics and war wounded. 'Kraft durch Freude' would organise transport for them, and for workers in the munitions industry, to travel to Bayreuth. The festivals would be a reward for their sacrifice and maintain morale for the ongoing war. Every night, one thousand, five hundred people would experience Wagner's operas with full board provided, all paid for by The Third Reich. Culture would be freely available and belong to the people, just as Wagner himself had propounded. Trenches were dug to protect audiences in case of a bombing raid. Hitler took up residence at Bayreuth during the festivals and made plans to build an auditorium which would accommodate thousands.

A Valkyrie in a Holy War

The fact that Wagner's works were now oiling the wheels of the war industry didn't make things easier for Flagstad. Norwegian audiences were introduced to the link between Wagner's operas and Nazism. The dramas supported the assertion that the Germanic people belonged to a chosen 'race', which was destined to reign over the world. This would be achieved through a 'Holy War', in which, to put it bluntly, the end would justify the means. Soldiers and terrorists are indoctrinated to believe they are fighting against evil, and their conduct is therefore irreproachable. The concept of heavenly rewards (Valhalla, Paradise etc.) characterises this type of rupture in the basic premise of respect for human life.

The Hamburg State Opera and Philharmonic Orchestra visited Oslo from 3rd – 10th October, 1940, to take part in a week-long celebration of German culture. One hundred and sixty singers, dancers, musicians and technicians mounted a production of *Die Walküre* at the National Theatre. A number of singers who would later find international fame took to the stage, including Joachim Sattler, Hans Hotter and Ferdinand Frantz. Flagstad performed with both Frantz and Hotter a number of times after the war, in Europe and in the USA. It's evident from the review in *Deutche Zeitung in Norwegen* that the opera portrayed the German spirit's unyielding strength. The artwork unveiled the victorious power of German culture.

Propaganda transformed the opera's lead character, the Valkyrie Brunhilda, into a Joan of Arc for Hitler's Germany. The blazing female Mercury was presented as a dark, demonic figure who led the Nazi forces to death and destruction. The Ride of the Valkyries was deliberately used as background music in a film showing the Luftwaffe's attack on Crete. The Nazi reinterpretation of the Valkyrie continues to be deployed, for example in the film *Apocalypse Now*, where the music accompanies a scene in which American helicopters invade and destroy Vietnam and its people. Hitler abused the figure of the Valkyrie to inspire his blood soaked war, and later, German officers turned the archetype against him. This resulted in 'Operation Valkyrie', the assassination attempt which took place on 20th July, 1940.

Flagstad's interpretations, as well as films made by Paramount pictures and Big Broadcast in 1938, which show Flagstad singing Brunhilda's battle cry, 'Ho jo ta jo', meant she was forever identified with the character. The battle cry had been part of the program at many of her concerts in the USA and Europe. Norwegian audiences had also heard her 'Ho jo ta ho' a number of times. This led to a now unhappy association.

In Nordic mythology it was the Valkyries' role to choose those who would fall in battle. They took the dead warriors back to Odin in Vallhalla, and Freyja also had her own kingdom of the dead. The most bloodthirsty among them remained with Odin, while the unremarkable warriors could look forward to Freyja's embrace. The warriors found life after death with Odin and Freyja, up until judgement day, the Ragnarok, when they were to fight alongside the Gods.

This mythical framework became destructive in the hands of Nazism. The idea that the Nazi movement was legitimate and 'good', deployed to fight 'evil', sowed the seeds for persecution, war, violence and mass murder. Soldiers were presented with a code of honour which promised eternal glory in return for killing and maiming the enemy in the name of the cause. Collective delusions like this became a powerful

underlying force in the war machine. We recognise the mechanism from more recent history, in radicalised terrorists, martyrs who, buoyed by their faith in eternal life and honour, blow themselves up, taking bystanders with them.