

Falsehoods instead of Ukrainian reality: an emotional plague

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Vincent Pr sumey and Stefan Bekier examine the myths and legends that are circulated about Ukraine to deny its right to national sovereignty. A Labour Hub long read.

Ukraine and Ukrainians are the subject of a series of myths and legends on the one hand, and erasures of their real history on the other. These falsehoods and silences have deep roots in Russian imperial prejudices and representations, but their scope is more than Russian. It is in fact a central part of the history of the 20th century that is obscured and replaced by an unhealthy fantasy version of history. Reappropriating the real history of the revolutions and counter-revolutions of the 20th century requires incorporating Ukraine. And since February 24th, 2022, it is a necessity if we are to understand the 21st century.

The Russian imperial identity was built by absorbing, crushing and denying Ukrainian nationality. The writer Gogol, the musician Tchaikovsky, the painter Repin: who knows that they were Ukrainian? The first oversight is therefore that of a very old struggle against national oppression – it can be traced back to the 17th century – which culminated in a specific Ukrainian and peasant revolution in 1917-1918. Most of the dominant historical narratives of the years 1917-20 of the 20th century in Ukraine are easy to summarise: “it was messy”. In reality, the Ukrainian revolution rubbed shoulders with the Russian revolution and was denied by it; that’s why the history is seen as “messy” and this was not the least important, but still ignored, cause of the rapid degeneration of the Russian revolution.

Only one current in the Ukrainian revolution is widely known and crudely portrayed: Makhno, the anarchist-communist current as it described itself. Massive currents such as the Ukapiests (independence communists), the Borotbists (Ukrainian socialist-revolutionaries), as well as the revolutionary components of the Ukrainian People’s Republic (1918-1920) and the national oppositions within Ukrainian Bolshevism are largely hidden from history.

Stalin’s famine

According to Putin, it was that scoundrel Lenin who invented Ukraine to weaken holy Russia. A soft version of this legend can be found even in a Trotskyist historian, Jean-Jacques Marie, who ignores the central reality of the Ukrainian revolution and explains that Ukrainian nationality was awakened by Bolshevism in the 1920s. In reality, Lenin was forced to integrate its existence, and the very name of the USSR, a-national, which he imposed against Stalin (who wanted the whole new state to be called “Russia”) during his final battle at the end of 1922, was originally a demand of the Ukrainian independence communists, dating from 1919. The existence of the Ukrainian nation was thus recognised within the framework of the USSR, but with limits and contradictions.

The second major historical concealment concerns the way Ukrainians were treated by Stalin, who deliberately decided that they should not be helped in the face of the famine caused by

collectivisation and the destruction of livestock. Four million Ukrainians starved to death in 1932-33, with the famine officially labelled a nationalist lie. Barbed wire and military lines prevented people from fleeing and the internal passport system, the propiska, typical of the 'Soviet' regime, was introduced from then on. This hidden tragedy was contemporaneous with Hitler's rise to power in Germany. Of course, Stalin did not want to kill all Ukrainians: he 'only' considered that the death of a few million of them would be a lesser evil, or even an advantage. The designation of genocide seems justified for the Holodomor: but this was hidden genocide, one it was forbidden to speak about.

Ukrainian nationalism was initially 'left-wing' and the existence of a Soviet Ukraine, until collectivisation, could still be perceived positively by Ukrainians in Poland (Galicia and Volhynia) and Czechoslovakia (Ruthenia). The socially regressive effect of Stalinism, the kolkhozes and the Holodomor, completed by the physical elimination in the USSR in 1937 of the Communist Party of Western Ukraine, boosted the most reactionary currents, admirers of Mussolini and then Hitler, claiming to be 'the authentic nationalism', no longer political and cultural in nature, but 'ethnic'.

'Banderism' - an anti-Semitic movement

These currents were later called 'Banderism', after one of their main leaders, Stepan Bandera, who had tried to form, in Lviv, a Ukrainian state under the tutelage of Nazi Germany. It lasted a week because the Nazis had no intention of protecting a vassal Ukraine: the Ukrainians were for them sub-Russians, good for toiling in the kolkhozes, which were, it should be noted, maintained under SS command.

The majority of the 'Banderist' forces (in fact split into several armed factions) actively engaged in anti-Semitic genocide, and a large part of them also undertook the killing of Polish peasants in Volhynia, previously favoured by the Polish regime against the Ukrainians. In 1944 most of the 'Banderist' forces (OUN and UPA) were fighting the Red Army, the Wehrmacht, the Vlassov Army (Nazi collaborators from the CPSU), and the Polish resistance at the same time. Some of them moved to more left-wing positions, returning to the themes of the old nationalism of the 17-20s, but the antisemitic plague remained prevalent.

Ukrainian peasants, while they were oppressed for centuries, undoubtedly had their own victims: the Jews, and a substantial part of the population had been favourably disposed towards, and even participated in, the Shoah. However, it must also be said that the proportion of Ukrainians who died fighting the Nazis was higher than the proportion of Russians (and annexed by the latter in the commemorations of the 'Great Patriotic War') and that it was Ukrainian regiments of the Red Army that liberated Auschwitz.

In the dominant accounts, everything that preceded the Second World War is obscured, but the Banderite and antisemitic aspects are magnified as the hallmark of all Ukrainian identity. The origin of this representation is Soviet and Russian: any hint of independence could only be 'fascist'. This is the formidable core of a racist fantasy version of event that presents itself as anti-racist: Ukrainians are inherently anti-Semitic, they carry an original sin - it should be noted that Soviet and Russian propaganda has been quite indifferent to the specificity of anti-Semitism and insists on this subject only in relation to Ukrainians. Conversely, a part of the oppressed Ukrainian youth has internalized the stigma and turned it around, taking up Banderite or Fascist emblems and flags, usually without knowing the historical facts. It is worth noting that one of the best and most relentless studies on the antisemitism of the 'Banderist' currents is by a Ukrainian nationalist historian, John Paul Himka.

Post-Soviet Ukraine

Soviet Ukraine became an independent state in December 1991, in a massive referendum in which over 90% of the population voted for independence, with just over 80% in the Donbass and 54% in Crimea. A few months earlier, U.S. President George H. Bush, on a visit to Kyiv, had opposed such a move. This independence was the final blow to the existence of the USSR and was immediately attacked by Yeltsin's Russia. The pressure exerted led, in 1994, to the signing of the Budapest Memorandum: the nuclear weapons stored in Ukraine – which temporarily made it the world's third nuclear power! – were moved to Russia, which kept a fleet based in Crimea, in return for a guarantee of its borders.

It's a little known fact that the Western powers massively lobbied in favour of Russia for this outcome, including financially. This contradicts the prevailing view that from the early 1990s onwards, NATO was only interested in 'encircling Russia'. In fact, NATO voluntarily deprived itself, from the outset, of the main means of 'encircling' Russia, which would have been Ukraine.

In Ukraine, as in Russia, oligarchic trusts were formed from the state apparatus and mass privatisations: the main base of capital is the most important industrial region, the Donbass, and it is structurally linked to Russia (through the mafia clans of Donetsk and Dnipropetrovsk). In other words, the channel of 'capitalist' pressure is mainly Russian, rather than being 'Western'. Full independence does not yet exist.

In 2004, the victory of a mafioso supported by the Donetsk clan, Yanukovych, in rigged presidential elections, produced a protest movement called the 'Orange Revolution. Temporarily victorious, this movement was, however, deceived by the politicians it had put in power, and Yanukovych returned to the presidency in 2010. Russian propaganda, widely relayed throughout the world, both by left-wing 'anti-imperialist' sectors and by right-wing and far-right sectors, denounced the 'orange revolutions' as Western plots against Russia and 'traditional values'. This theme was first used against Ukraine and was taken up again against any democratic uprising against a supposedly 'anti-imperialist' dictatorship, such as Bashar al-Assad's Syria, in the years that followed.

Maidan

However, in 2013-2014, Ukraine experienced a revolutionary crisis, with the Maidan, which led to the ousting of Yanukovych. His flight to Russia on the night of 22nd February 2014 was not at all the result of a *coup d'état*, but of tremendous popular insurrectionary pressure. A little earlier, the German, French and Polish foreign ministers had come to negotiate his retention in an impossible 'national union'. The Maidan was a mass democratic uprising. Of course, it did not claim to be 'progressive' or 'socialist': we are in a country that has experienced Stalinism and the Holodomor. The most telling comparison for the French would be that of the *gilets jaunes*: the Maidan was like the *gilets jaunes* to the power of ten.

The lack of understanding, in Western Europe, of a movement that had illusions about the European Union, and the Russian propaganda relayed by both the Stalinist left and by parties like the *Rassemblement National* (formerly the *Front National*) in France, have allowed this reality to be concealed: the Maidan was the first major insurrectionary movement on the European continent in the cycle that began with the 'Arab revolutions', a very important link in the history of popular movements. It is therefore crucial for the established order to erase its significance by demonising it with the words, of Moscow origin, of 'fascist junta' and another 'Western *coup d'état*'.

Russia annexes Crimea

A few days later, Russia annexed Crimea (in defiance of the Budapest Memorandum). From Jean-Luc Mélenchon to Marine Le Pen, a dominant consensus then repeated the truism: "Crimea has always

been Russian”, sometimes supplemented by the fantasised account of Khrushchev granting it to Ukraine in 1954 on a drunken night. In fact, the only time in its history that the people of Crimea were given a free choice, in 1991, they made it Ukrainian – by 54%, including among its inhabitants who said they felt nationally Russian. Crimea, then Tatar and Ottoman, also populated by Jews, Armenians, Greeks, Karaites..., was annexed by Russia in 1783 (a little after the purchase of Corsica by France!). The multicultural character of its population – Ukrainians, Russians, Tatars, others, mixed – makes it a special region. But in the Russian imperial system, it is strategic, pointing towards the Black Sea and the straits. Its allocation to the Ukrainian SSR in 1954 went hand in hand with the affirmation of a ‘Russian world’ between ‘brotherly peoples’, with the Russians as big brothers and the Belorussians and Ukrainians as little brothers. The Crimean Tatars, deported by Stalin to Central Asia, remained a hotbed of democratic struggle against the USSR bureaucracy and Great Russian hegemony, allied with the Ukrainians.

Therefore, a return of Crimea to Ukraine is entirely legitimate, if it guarantees the democratic equality of citizens and national groups (the Tatars are an insurance in this sense). The Russian nation, in order to become democratic, needs to be relieved of Crimea and to recognise the equality and independence of Ukraine.

In the following weeks, the oligarchic parties tried to mobilise the population of Donbass against the so-called ‘fascist junta’, without much success. The population of Donbass is Russian-speaking in the cities and partly Ukrainian-speaking in the countryside. But Russian-speaking does not mean Russian, any more than English-speaking means English in Ireland!

Having said that, it is true that the population of Donbass is quite ‘mixed’ and in particular that after 1992 and the last big miners’ strikes, they were very disappointed with the collapse in living conditions in ‘independent’ Ukraine. In 2014 it is in fact passive and takes a wait-and-see attitude. A kind of oligarchic rebellion proclaims autonomous zones, and soon after ‘people’s republics’ in Donetsk and Luhansk. Very quickly, there were poorly concealed infiltrations of Russian armed forces – and mafia, fascist and Stalinist groups – that held these ‘people’s republics’ at arm’s length: they would never have held out otherwise.

The Russian ‘hybrid war’ in the Donbass killed about 14,000 people, with roughly equal casualties on both sides, mostly in 2014-2015. But an extraordinary outpouring of propaganda, disguised as hundreds of brown, red, ‘re-information’ sites and blogs, distils the worst myths about what is happening there to a European audience of both ‘communist’ cultural heirs and right-wing ‘anti-European’ networks. One example is the falsely objective reports of Paul Moreira or the anguished and caricatured accounts of Anne-Laure Baumel, which circulate on the net and which are fed on by suckers thinking they can escape the ‘mainstream media’.

The confusion between Russian and Russian-speaking and the belief in a ‘Donbass people’ oppressed by the ‘Kiev regime’ provide the framework for an extraordinary number of falsehoods, such as the ‘Russian-speaking child crucified by the Nazis’, swastikas everywhere, etc. From 2014, these networks have made people believe that a ‘genocide’ has begun, with the ‘Kiev regime’ massacring the population. In fact, the then completely disoriented Ukrainian state either did not react, or reacted very awkwardly and sometimes brutally, above all by allowing paramilitary groups to act, which then occupied the vacuum.

The language lie

Another huge falsehood from February-March 2014 is the so-called ban on the Russian language in Ukraine. To believe it, you cannot have seen and heard the numerous demonstrations at the time with yellow and blue flags and slogans in... Russian. An attempt by Ukraine’s Supreme Court, just

after Yanukovych's flight, to abolish the status of Russian as a second official language in many oblasts (regions), which was not even followed up, was presented as a huge terrorist attack on 'Russian'. In reality, it is the Ukrainian language that has long been repressed in Ukraine and is still repressed in the two so-called 'People's Republics' and Crimea. On the other hand, only after 2014 and especially since 2017, was Ukrainian affirmed as the state language and became systematically used in education. After February 24th 2022, Russian begins to retreat, often because of the will of its former speakers themselves, and therefore by choice, but also because of political and military pressure. In addition, a large proportion of Ukrainians speak an original mixture of the two languages, *Suryuk*.

After the annexation of Crimea and the start of the 'hybrid war' in the Donbass, Russia and its mafia or oligarchic proxies planned more extensive conquests, which failed from Kharkiv to Odessa via Mariupol. In Odessa, on May 2nd 2014, pro-Russian and secessionist demonstrations were suppressed by larger, pro-Ukrainian (and Russian-speaking!) demonstrations, despite the support of sectors of the police and the threat of the Russian army stationed in Transnistria since 1991. Joint provocations by sectors of the nationalist ultra-right (Pravyi Sector) and the pro-Russian 'left' (KPU, the Ukrainian CP), resulted in the confinement of 'pro-Russian' demonstrators in the 'House of Trade Unions' (the inverted commas are necessary: this is not a trade union building at all, but a former official Soviet building) where a fire caused by Molotov cocktails thrown by both sides resulted in the death of about 40 people in the building, despite attempts by anarchist elements among the pro-Ukrainian demonstrators to save them.

'Trade Union House pogrom'

Immediately, the impressive machine of troll factories and blog networks linked directly or indirectly to Russian power unleashed one of the worst falsehoods of the period: the 'Trade Union House pogrom' where 'fascists' allegedly burned pro-Russian left-wing activists. This fantasy has become one of the favourite symbolic images of the mugs in Western Europe who think they 'know what's going on in Ukraine'. The buzz about it actually served to mask what really happened on May 2nd 2014: the halting of Russia's indirect offensive in '*Novorossia*', the colonial name for southern Ukraine. The unwillingness of the Ukrainian government of President Poroshenko to conduct a serious investigation has played into the hands of this unhealthy flood of propaganda.

Overall, the falsehoods and scare stories about Ukraine that form the dominant background of so-called 'counter-information', but which are really rooted in a conformism masquerading as anti-conformist, are summed up in a terrible racist phrase: 'Ukrainian Nazis'. The link is made with Bandera. At the basis of the myth, there is the reality of three political currents. Svoboda, which is modelled on Bandera's, based in Galicia (Lviv), was in the midst of an electoral breakthrough under Yanukovych, who supported them from the wings in the hope of winning elections in the name of unity against them. Pravyi Sector is a kind of security service that appeared on the Maïdan, which distinguished itself by protecting the crowd from the shooting of 'berkuts' (police infiltrated by Russian agents) and from the attacks of *tituchki* (small thugs). The third group appeared shortly afterwards, when paramilitary leagues compensated for the total failure of the authorities in the face of Russian aggression in the Donbass: this was the famous Azov battalion, which later became a non-political unit of the army, distinct from the political appearance of the first Azov battalion, the 'National Corps', which had also been a resounding social and electoral failure. But as soon as elections were held, the total score of these currents was less than 2% - whereas it had risen to 12% just before the Maidan.

In fact, it is the self-organisation of civil society that is making massive progress in Ukraine: a kind of generalised resourcefulness that is indispensable for everyday life. This includes the trade unions, the former official Soviet organisation which has been completely shaken up and renewed (FPU) and

the independent organisation which actually appeared in the Donbass in 1989, the KVPU – a cousin, therefore, of the Belarusian BKDP and the Russian KTR.

In contrast, all these social and trade union organisations are banned and crushed by assassinations and kidnappings in the ‘People’s Republics’ of the Donbass, which do not tolerate strikes or trade unions, and where an orthodox, conservative, homophobic, anti-Semitic, anti-Roma orientation is dominant. The phantasmagoria about ‘Ukrainian Nazis’ also serves to mask this reality, at a time when the entire far right in Europe and beyond is adopting Moscow as its holy city.

Minsk agreement and bans on parties

The Poroshenko presidency, from within the elite, was not in tune with the real evolution of society after the Maidan and used the latent war in the Donbass as a means of discipline and control, without really intending to prosecute it, let alone win it. He negotiated, under Franco-German pressure, the ‘Minsk agreements’ which in fact only served to freeze the situation – relatively speaking – and made good use of Ukrainian independence and sovereignty, since they provided for the eventual decentralisation of the state in which the Russian-controlled republics would have had their place, and even a right of veto over strategic choices. As the Zelenskiy government finally said in January 2022, ‘... it was already clear to any rational person that these documents were unworkable’ (words of its spokesman Oleksi Danilov). The line of these agreements was that of the Western governments, and the positions of so-called ‘pacifists’ in the style of the ‘Peace Movement’ still refer to it.

Another myth about today’s Ukraine is the ‘ban on communism’ and the left-wing parties. In fact, it was the pro-Russian parties that ended up being banned – while keeping their deputies who were protected by their parliamentary immunity – after the February 2022 invasion. Among these is the main party linked to the Donbass mafia, the ‘Party of Life’ (13% of the votes in 2019). This clientelist formation developed from the CP, in power until 1991. The ‘Socialist Party’ or the ‘Progressive Socialist Party’, which are ultra-conservative, homophobic formations with anti-Semitic tendencies, also originated from the CP. The ‘Progressive’ SP is linked to the US multinational Lyndon Larouche, which finances Cheminade’s candidacy in the French presidential elections. The CP (KPU) was the subject of a procedure to ban it under Poroshenko, who introduced laws against Soviet symbols. The procedure was only successful after February 24th 2022, when its leader Petro Simonenko, had already left for Moscow – this corrupt billionaire reappeared in Cuba a few weeks later to do ‘anti-imperialism’!

This so-called ultra-reactionary ‘left’ has in fact enjoyed great indulgence in a country threatened with death and destruction. Ukrainians who fight to defend their existence and their rights are entitled to criticise their various governments and the oligarchs for this indulgence.

Special mention must be made of a ‘fake’ group whose function was to make the Western far left believe in the existence of a far-left current ‘fighting fascism’: the Borotba group, which was fond of Che posters, was above all an export product for ‘far-left’ dupes, praised by Die Linke and other European currents, and controlled by the FSB. It has now disappeared (its leaders who are still identifiable are in the Russian forces).

The Ukrainian radical left

As a result of the Maidan and, perhaps definitively, February 24th 2022, the Ukrainian far left has gone through a clarification that has no equivalent in Russia, leading to a complete break with the Stalinist past, a critical stance on the Russian Bolsheviks, and an unqualified practical embrace of democratic political forms and guaranteed rights. A genuine left is now emerging in Ukraine – in the

trade unions, in feminist organisations, with the Sotsyalny Rukh organisation, anarchists and various other groups – whose character as a progressive force is based on participation in the armed struggle against the genocidal invasion, and whose level of political and theoretical thinking is at the world's forefront, something that many of the wilfully blind of the world's far left are ignoring.

Volodymyr Zelenskiy's very large presidential victory in 2019 was, to some extent, an expression of the vitality of Ukrainian civil society, combined with disgust with the old parties. Zelenskiy was an actor who had portrayed a good guy from the people who became president in the series *Servant of the People*. He claims to have no agenda other than the fight for peace and against corruption. The fact that he is a Russian-speaking Jew is very important (and enrages the followers of the 'Ukrainian Nazism' myth: here is a Jewish Nazi!): the ethnic or culturally exclusive conception of the nation, expressed by the extreme right-wing currents claiming to be more or less Banderist, has in fact been in retreat since the Maidan surge of social self-activity in favour of a democratic, inclusive and civic conception.

Oligarchs

There is an oligarchic faction behind Zelenskiy – that of Kolomoiski, of Dnipro, which financed his studios – but he will emancipate himself from it. He began by trying to move towards the implementation of the Minsk agreements, before backing down. On the social level, Zelenskiy represents the illusory hope of the emergence of a non-oligarchic Ukrainian bourgeoisie, to which his positions on social issues – ultra-liberal – and societal issues – inclusive and secular – correspond. In general, his character was largely underestimated until the invasion. Both Biden and Putin thought he would flee. As he has done just the opposite, he is becoming a national hero, the first truly popular president in the country's history, now completely associated with the war.

This all-out war since February 2022 was in no way caused by NATO expansion or any aggression towards Russia on its part – and conversely, it is in the process of causing such expansion! Fantasy and racist representations of 'Ukrainian Nazis' and the downplaying and even denial of Russian imperialism play a big part in hindering true internationalist solidarity with the armed and unarmed Ukrainian resistance.

Summary

Let's summarise. The historic national oppression in Ukraine and the struggle against it, the Ukrainian revolution of 1917-1920, the Holodomor, the real circumstances of independence in 1991 and the Budapest Memorandum are all concealed. Banderism and the 'Ukrainian Nazis' are set up as fetishes. The revolutionary and democratic reality of Maidan is denied and replaced by the '*coup d'état*' and the 'Kiev junta'. The vitality of civil society and the existence of a real fighting Ukrainian left is denied and replaced by 'the oligarchs' and 'nationalism'. All of this has been brought to a head since 2014: there would be pogroms, swastikas everywhere, and genocide in the Donbass. This delusion had and has a precise function: to legitimise the real Great Russian genocidal project of Putin.

Moreover, the persistence of these fantasies in the form of a nightmarish subconscious feeling of worry and guilt probably hinders the engagement of activists, who rationally, but superficially, clearly understand that Russia is the aggressor and that this war is asymmetric and colonial.

In the outlook of Russian imperial nationalism, Ukrainians can only be Russians or dead: Ukrainian reality is now officially defined as 'Satanist'. Its projection into the pseudo-global anti-imperialism of fools activates fantastic representations of the same type – a guilty people, essentially 'Nazi', in short genetically! – as those of anti-Semitism (with which they are easily associated). For several years

now, we have been dealing with a veritable emotional plague – this expression was used by Wilhelm Reich or Erich Fromm to refer to Nazism and anti-Semitism – which has been fixed on the Ukrainians, and which it is now time to treat and eliminate.

Its essence, which is in no way an advantage, is to claim to be ‘anti-fascist’ (whereas theorists of the satanic character of Ukrainian-ness, such as Dugin and others, refer very positively to fascism and Nazism!). This is a kind of fascism with an anti-fascist alibi, as Timothy Snyder explains – a particularly perverse form of ideological inversion. Activists who claim to be communists, or anti-liberals, or ‘in revolt’, or ‘radical leftists’, or who imagine themselves to be Trotskyists, and, worst of all, the organisations that participate in this emotional plague, are morally and intellectually condemning themselves to death, because they are associated with a genocidal enterprise. Let them wake up, or else shame on them.

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