

# Fascism, Russia, and Ukraine

[Timothy Snyder](#)

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Valery Sharifulin/ITAR-TASS/Corbis

The opposition leader Vitali Klitschko attending a protest rally in Maidan square, Kiev, December 16, 2013

The students were the first to protest against the regime of President Viktor Yanukovych on the Maidan, the central square in Kiev, last November. These were the Ukrainians with the most to lose, the young people who unreflectively thought of themselves as Europeans and who wished for themselves a life, and a Ukrainian homeland, that were European. Many of them were politically on the left, some of them radically so. After years of negotiation and months of promises, their government, under President Yanukovych, had at the last moment failed to sign a major trade agreement with the European Union.

When the riot police came and beat the students in late November, a new group, the Afghan veterans, came to the Maidan. These men of middle age, former soldiers and officers of the Red Army, many of them bearing the scars of battlefield wounds, came to protect “their children,” as they put it. They didn’t mean their own sons and daughters: they meant the best of the youth, the pride and future of the country. After the Afghan veterans came many others, tens of thousands, then hundreds of thousands, now not so much in favor of Europe but in defense of decency.

What does it mean to come to the Maidan? The square is located close to some of the major buildings of government, and is now a traditional site of protest. Interestingly, the word *maidan*

exists in Ukrainian but not in Russian, but even people speaking Russian use it because of its special implications. In origin it is just the Arabic word for “square,” a public place. But a *maidan* now means in Ukrainian what the Greek word *agora* means in English: not just a marketplace where people happen to meet, but a place where they deliberately meet, precisely in order to deliberate, to speak, and to create a political society. During the protests the word *maidan* has come to mean the act of public politics itself, so that for example people who use their cars to organize public actions and protect other protestors are called the *automaïdan*.

The protesters represent every group of Ukrainian citizens: Russian speakers and Ukrainian speakers (although most Ukrainians are bilingual), people from the cities and the countryside, people from all regions of the country, members of all political parties, the young and the old, Christians, Muslims, and Jews. Every major Christian denomination is represented by believers and most of them by clergy. The Crimean Tatars march in impressive numbers, and Jewish leaders have made a point of supporting the movement. The diversity of the Maidan is impressive: the group that monitors hospitals so that the regime cannot kidnap the wounded is run by young feminists. An important hotline that protesters call when they need help is staffed by LGBT activists.

On January 16, the Ukrainian government, headed by President Yanukovich, tried to put an end to Ukrainian civil society. A series of laws passed hastily and without following normal procedure did away with freedom of speech and assembly, and removed the few remaining checks on executive authority. This was intended to turn Ukraine into a dictatorship and to make all participants in the Maidan, by then probably numbering in the low millions, into criminals. The result was that the protests, until then entirely peaceful, became violent. Yanukovich lost support, even in his political base in the southeast, near the Russian border.

After weeks of responding peacefully to arrests and beatings by the riot police, many Ukrainians had had enough. A fraction of the protesters, some but by no means all representatives of the political right and far right, decided to take the fight to the police. Among them were members of the far-right party Svoboda and a new conglomeration of nationalists who call themselves the Right Sector (Pravyi Sektor). Young men, some of them from right-wing groups and others not, tried to take by force the public spaces claimed by the riot police. Young Jewish men formed their own combat group, or *sotnia*, to take the fight to the authorities.

Although Yanukovich rescinded most of the dictatorship laws, lawless violence by the regime, which started in November, continued into February. Members of the opposition were shot and killed, or hosed down in freezing temperatures to die of hypothermia. Others were tortured and left in the woods to die.

During the first two weeks of February, the Yanukovich regime sought to restore some of the dictatorship laws through decrees, bureaucratic shortcuts, and new legislation. On February 18, an announced parliamentary debate on constitutional reform was abruptly canceled. Instead, the government sent thousands of riot police against the protesters of Kiev. Hundreds of people were wounded by rubber bullets, tear gas, and truncheons. Dozens were killed.

The future of this protest movement will be decided by Ukrainians. And yet it began with the hope that Ukraine could one day join the European Union, an aspiration that for many Ukrainians means something like the rule of law, the absence of fear, the end of corruption, the social welfare state, and free markets without intimidation from syndicates controlled by the president.

The course of the protest has very much been influenced by the presence of a rival project, based in Moscow, called the Eurasian Union. This is an international commercial and political union that does not yet exist but that is to come into being in January 2015. The Eurasian Union, unlike the European Union, is not based on the principles of the equality and democracy of member states, the rule of law, or human rights.

On the contrary, it is a hierarchical organization, which by its nature seems unlikely to admit any members that are democracies with the rule of law and human rights. Any democracy within the Eurasian Union would pose a threat to Putin's rule in Russia. Putin wants Ukraine in his Eurasian Union, which means that Ukraine must be authoritarian, which means that the Maidan must be crushed.

The dictatorship laws of January 16 were obviously based on Russian models, and were proposed by Ukrainian legislators with close ties to Moscow. They seem to have been Russia's condition for financial support of the Yanukovych regime. Before they were announced, Putin offered Ukraine a large loan and promised reductions in the price of Russian natural gas. But in January the result was not a capitulation to Russia. The people of the Maidan defended themselves, and the protests continue. Where this will lead is anyone's guess; only the Kremlin expresses certainty about what it all means.

The protests in the Maidan, we are told again and again by Russian propaganda and by the Kremlin's friends in Ukraine, mean the return of National Socialism to Europe. The Russian foreign minister, in Munich, lectured the Germans about their support of people who salute Hitler. The Russian media continually make the claim that the Ukrainians who protest are Nazis. Naturally, it is important to be attentive to the far right in Ukrainian politics and history. It is still a serious presence today, although less important than the far right in France, Austria, or the Netherlands. Yet it is the Ukrainian regime rather than its opponents that resorts to anti-Semitism, instructing its riot police that the opposition is led by Jews. In other words, the Ukrainian government is telling itself that its opponents are Jews and us that its opponents are Nazis.

The strange thing about the claim from Moscow is the political ideology of those who make it. The Eurasian Union is the enemy of the European Union, not just in strategy but in ideology. The European Union is based on a historical lesson: that the wars of the twentieth century were based on false and dangerous ideas, National Socialism and Stalinism, which must be rejected and indeed overcome in a system guaranteeing free markets, free movement of people, and the welfare state. Eurasianism, by contrast, is presented by its advocates as the opposite of liberal democracy.

The Eurasian ideology draws an entirely different lesson from the twentieth century. Founded around 2001 by the Russian political scientist Aleksandr Dugin, it proposes the realization of National Bolshevism. Rather than rejecting totalitarian ideologies, Eurasianism calls upon politicians of the twenty-first century to draw what is useful from both fascism and Stalinism. Dugin's major work, *The Foundations of Geopolitics*, published in 1997, follows closely the ideas of Carl Schmitt, the leading Nazi political theorist. Eurasianism is not only the ideological source of the Eurasian Union, it is also the creed of a number of people in the Putin administration, and the moving force of a rather active far-right Russian youth movement. For years Dugin has openly supported the division and colonization of Ukraine.

The point man for Eurasian and Ukrainian policy in the Kremlin is Sergei Glazyev, an economist who like Dugin tends to combine radical nationalism with nostalgia for Bolshevism. He was a member of the Communist Party and a Communist deputy in the Russian parliament before cofounding a far-right party called Rodina, or Motherland. In 2005 some of its deputies signed a petition to the Russian prosecutor general asking that all Jewish organizations be banned from Russia.

Later that year Motherland was banned from taking part in further elections after complaints that its advertisements incited racial hatred. The most notorious showed dark-skinned people eating watermelon and throwing the rinds to the ground, then called for Russians to clean up their cities. Glazyev's book *Genocide: Russia and the New World Order* claims that the sinister forces of the "new world order" conspired against Russia in the 1990s to bring about economic policies that amounted to "genocide." This book was published in English by Lyndon LaRouche's magazine *Executive Intelligence Review* with a preface by LaRouche. Today *Executive Intelligence Review* echoes Kremlin propaganda, spreading the word in English that Ukrainian protesters have carried out a Nazi coup and started a civil war.

The populist media campaign for the Eurasian Union is now in the hands of Dmitry Kiselyov, the host of the most important talk show in Russia, and since December also the director of the state-run Russian media conglomerate designed to form national public opinion. Best known for saying that gays who die in car accidents should have their hearts cut from their bodies and incinerated, Kiselyov has taken Putin's campaign against gay rights and transformed it into a weapon against European integration. Thus when the then German foreign minister, who is gay, visited Kiev in December and met with Vitali Klitschko, the heavyweight champion and opposition politician, Kiselyov dismissed Klitschko as a gay icon. According to the Russian foreign minister, the exploitation of sexual politics is now to be an open weapon in the struggle against the "decadence" of the European Union.

Following the same strategy, Yanukovych's government claimed, entirely falsely, that the price of closer relations with the European Union was the recognition of gay marriage in Ukraine. Kiselyov is quite open about the Russian media strategy toward the Maidan: to "apply the correct political technology," then "bring it to the point of overheating" and bring to bear "the magnifying glass of TV and the Internet."

Why exactly do people with such views think they can call other people fascists? And why does anyone on the Western left take them seriously? One line of reasoning seems to run like this: the

Russians won World War II, and therefore can be trusted to spot Nazis. Much is wrong with this. World War II on the eastern front was fought chiefly in what was then Soviet Ukraine and Soviet Belarus, not in Soviet Russia. Five percent of Russia was occupied by the Germans; all of Ukraine was occupied by the Germans. Apart from the Jews, whose suffering was by far the worst, the main victims of Nazi policies were not Russians but Ukrainians and Belarusians. There was no Russian army fighting in World War II, but rather a Soviet Red Army. Its soldiers were disproportionately Ukrainian, since it took so many losses in Ukraine and recruited from the local population. The army group that liberated Auschwitz was called the First Ukrainian Front.

The other source of purported Eurasian moral legitimacy seems to be this: since the representatives of the Putin regime only very selectively distanced themselves from Stalinism, they are therefore reliable inheritors of Soviet history, and should be seen as the automatic opposite of Nazis, and therefore to be trusted to oppose the far right.

Again, much is wrong about this. World War II began with an alliance between Hitler and Stalin in 1939. It ended with the Soviet Union expelling surviving Jews across its own border into Poland. After the founding of the State of Israel, Stalin began associating Soviet Jews with a world capitalist conspiracy, and undertook a campaign of arrests, deportations, and murders of leading Jewish writers. When he died in 1953 he was preparing a larger campaign against Jews.

After Stalin's death communism took on a more and more ethnic coloration, with people who wished to revive its glories claiming that its problem was that it had been spoiled by Jews. The ethnic purification of the communist legacy is precisely the logic of National Bolshevism, which is the foundational ideology of Eurasianism today. Putin himself is an admirer of the philosopher Ivan Ilin, who wanted Russia to be a nationalist dictatorship.

What does it mean when the wolf cries wolf? Most obviously, propagandists in Moscow and Kiev take us for fools—which by many indications is quite justified.

More subtly, what this campaign does is attempt to reduce the social tensions in a complex country to a battle of symbols about the past. Ukraine is not a theater for the historical propaganda of others or a puzzle from which pieces can be removed. It is a major European country whose citizens have important cultural and economic ties with both the European Union and Russia. To set its own course, Ukraine needs normal public debate, the restoration of parliamentary democracy, and workable relations with all of its neighbors. Ukraine is full of sophisticated and ambitious people. If people in the West become caught up in the question of whether they are largely Nazis or not, then they may miss the central issues in the present crisis.

In fact, Ukrainians are in a struggle against both the concentration of wealth and the concentration of armed force in the hands of Viktor Yanukovich and his close allies. The protesters might be seen as setting an example of courage for Americans of both the left and the right. Ukrainians make real sacrifices for the hope of joining the European Union. Might there be something to be learned from that among Euroskeptics in London or elsewhere? This is a dialogue that is not taking place.

The history of the Holocaust is part of our own public discourse, our *agora*, or *maidan*. The current Russian attempt to manipulate the memory of the Holocaust is so blatant and cynical that those who are so foolish to fall for it will one day have to ask themselves just how, and in the service of what, they have been taken in. If fascists take over the mantle of antifascism, the memory of the Holocaust will itself be altered. It will be more difficult in the future to refer to the Holocaust in the service of any good cause, be it the particular one of Jewish history or the general one of human rights.

—February 19, 2014

## Ukraine: The Haze of Propaganda

[Timothy Snyder](#)



Jerome Sessini/Magnum Photos

Protesters in Kiev, Ukraine, February 19, 2014

From Moscow to London to New York, the Ukrainian revolution has been seen through a haze of propaganda. Russian leaders and the Russian press have insisted that Ukrainian protesters were right-wing extremists and then that their victory was a coup. Ukraine's president, Viktor

Yanukovych, used the same clichés after a visit with the Russian president at Sochi. After his regime was overturned, he maintained he had been ousted by “right-wing thugs,” a claim echoed by the armed men who seized control of airports and government buildings in the southern Ukrainian district of Crimea on Friday.

Interestingly, the message from authoritarian regimes in Moscow and Kiev was not so different from some of what was written during the uprising in the English-speaking world, especially in publications of the far left and the far right. From Lyndon LaRouche’s *Executive Intelligence Review* through Ron Paul’s newsletter through *The Nation* and *The Guardian*, the story was essentially the same: little of the factual history of the protests, but instead a play on the idea of a nationalist, fascist, or even Nazi coup d’état.

In fact, it was a classic popular revolution. It began with an unmistakably reactionary regime. A leader sought to gather all power, political as well as financial, in his own hands. This leader came to power in democratic elections, to be sure, but then altered the system from within. For example, the leader had been a common criminal: a rapist and a thief. He found a judge who was willing to misplace documents related to his case. That judge then became the chief justice of the Supreme Court. There were no constitutional objections, subsequently, when the leader asserted ever more power for his presidency.

In power, this leader, this president, remained a thief, but now on a grand, perhaps even unsurpassed, scale. Throughout his country millions of small businessmen and businesswomen found it impossible to keep their firms afloat, thanks to the arbitrary demands of tax authorities. Their profits were taken by the state, and the autonomy that those profits might have given them were denied. Workers in the factories and mines had no means whatsoever of expression their own distress, since any attempt at a strike or even at labor organization would simply have led to their dismissal.

The country, Ukraine, was in effect an oligarchy, where much of the wealth was in the hands of people who could fit in one elevator. But even this sort of pluralism, the presence of more than one very rich person, was too much for the leader, Viktor Yanukovych. He wanted to be not only the president but the oligarch-in-chief. His son, a dentist, was suddenly one of the wealthiest men in Europe. Tens of billions of dollars simply disappeared from the state budget. Yanukovych built for himself a series of extravagant homes, perhaps the ugliest in architectural history.





Pochuyev Mikhail/ITAR-TASS Photo/Corbis

A villa at Mezhyhirya, an out-of-town estate of Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich north of Kiev

It is hard to have all of the power and all of the money at the same time, because power comes from the state, and the state has to have a budget. If a leader steals so much from the people that the state goes bankrupt, then his power is diminished. Yanukovich actually faced this problem last year. And so, despite everything, he became vulnerable, in a very curious way. He needed someone to finance the immediate debts of the Ukrainian state so that his regime would not fall along with it.

Struggling to pay his debts last year, the Ukrainian leader had two options. The first was to begin trade cooperation with the European Union. No doubt an association agreement with the EU would have opened the way for loans. But it also would have meant the risk of the application of the rule of law within Ukraine. The other alternative was to take money from another authoritarian regime, the great neighbor to the east, the Russian Federation.

In December of last year, the leader of this neighboring authoritarian regime, Vladimir Putin, offered a deal. From Russia's hard currency reserves accumulated by the sale of hydrocarbons he was willing to offer a loan of \$15 billion, and lower the price of natural gas from Russia. Putin had a couple of little preoccupations, however.

The first was the gay conspiracy. This was a subject that had dominated Russian propaganda throughout last year but which had been essentially absent from Ukraine. Perhaps Ukraine could



join in? Yes indeed: the Ukrainian prime minister began to explain to his population that Ukraine could not have closer cooperation with Europe, since the EU was interested chiefly in gay marriage.

Putin's second preoccupation was something called Eurasia. This was and is Putin's proposed rival to the European Union, a club of dictatorships meant to include Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan. Again, perhaps Ukraine could join? Yanukovich hesitated here, seeing the trap—the subordination of Ukraine of course meant his own subordination—but he did allow himself to be jollied along toward the necessary policies. He began to act like a proper dictator. He began to kill his own people in significant numbers. He bloodied his hands, making him an unlikely future partner for the European Union.

Enter a lonely, courageous Ukrainian rebel, a leading investigative journalist. A dark-skinned journalist who gets racially profiled by the regime. And a Muslim. And an Afghan. This is Mustafa Nayem, the man who started the revolution. Using social media, he called students and other young people to rally on the main square of Kiev in support of a European choice for Ukraine. That square is called the Maidan, which by the way is an Arab word. During the first few days of the protests the students called it the Euromaidan. Russian propaganda called it, predictably enough, the Gayeuromaidan.

When riot police were sent to beat the students, who came to defend them? More “Afghans,” but “Afghans” of a very different sort: Ukrainian veterans of the Soviet Red Army, men who had been sent to invade Afghanistan during after the Soviet invasion of that country in 1979. These men came to defend “their children,” as they called the students. But they were also defending a protest initiated by a man born in Kabul at the very time they were fighting their way toward it.

In December the crowds grew larger. By the end of the year, millions of people had taken part in protests, all over the country. Journalists were beaten. Individual activists were abducted. Some of them were tortured. Dozens disappeared and have not yet been found. As the New Year began the protests broadened. Muslims from southern Ukraine marched in large numbers. Representatives of the large Kiev Jewish community were prominently represented. Some of the most important organizers were Jews. The telephone hotline that people called to seek missing relatives was established by gay activists (people who have experience with hotlines). Some of the hospital guards who tried to stop the police from abducting the wounded were young feminists.

In all of these ways, the “decadent” West, as Russia's foreign minister put it, was present. Yes, there were some Jews, and there were some gays, in this revolution. And this was exploited by both the Russian and Ukrainian regimes in their internal propaganda. The Russian press presented the protest as part of a larger gay conspiracy. The Ukrainian regime instructed its riot police that the opposition was led by a larger Jewish conspiracy. Meanwhile, both regimes informed the outside world that the protestors were Nazis. Almost nobody in the West seemed to notice this contradiction.

On January 16, Yanukovich signed a series of laws that had been “passed” through parliament, entirely illegally, by a minority using only a show of hands. These laws, introduced by pro-

Russian legislators and similar to Russian models, severely constrained the freedom of speech and assembly, making of millions of protesters “extremists” who could be imprisoned. Organizations that had financial contacts with the outside world, including Catholic and Jewish groups, were suddenly “foreign agents” and subject to immediate harassment.

After weeks of maintaining their calm in the face of repeated assaults by the riot police, some protesters now chose violence. Out of public view, people had been dying at the hands of the police for weeks. Now some of the protesters were killed by the regime in public. The first Ukrainian protester to be killed was an Armenian. The second to be killed was a Belarusian.

Then came the mass killings by the regime. On February 18 the Ukrainian parliament was supposed to consider a compromise that many observers believed was a first step away from bloody confrontation: a constitutional reform to return the state to parliamentary democracy. Instead, the riot police were unleashed in Kiev, this time armed not only with tear gas, stun grenades, and rubber bullets, but also with live ammunition. The protesters fell back to the Maidan and defended it, the way revolutionaries do: with cobblestones, Molotov cocktails, and in the end their bare hands.

On February 20, an EU delegation was supposed to arrive to negotiate a truce. Instead, the regime orchestrated a bloodbath. The riot police fell back from some of the Maidan. When protesters followed, they were shot by snipers who had taken up positions on rooftops. Again and again people ran out to try to rescue the wounded, and again and again they were shot.



Gueorgui Pinkhassov/Magnum Photos

Protesters clashing with police in Kiev, Ukraine, February 2014

Who was killed? Dozens of people, in all about a hundred, most of them young men. Bohdan Solchanyk was a young lecturer at the Ukrainian Catholic University, a Ukrainian speaker from western Ukraine. He was shot and killed. Yevhen Kotlyov was an environmentalist from Kharkiv, a Russian speaker from eastern Ukraine. He was shot and killed. One of the people killed was a Russian citizen; a number of Russians had come to fight—most of them anarchists who had come to aid their Ukrainian anarchist comrades. At least two of those killed by the regime, and perhaps more, were Jews. One of those “Afghans,” Ukrainian veterans of the Red Army’s war in Afghanistan, was Jewish: Alexander Scherbatyuk. He was shot and killed by a sniper. Another of those killed was a Pole, a member of Ukraine’s Polish minority.

Has it ever before happened that people associated with Ukrainian, Russian, Belarusian, Armenian, Polish, and Jewish culture have died in a revolution that was started by a Muslim? Can we who pride ourselves in our diversity and tolerance think of anything remotely similar in our own histories?

The people were victorious as a result of sheer physical courage. The EU foreign ministers who were supposed to be treated to a bloody spectacle saw something else: the successful defense of the Maidan. The horrifying massacre provoked a general sense of outrage, even among some of the people who had been Yanukovych’s allies. He did something he probably had not, when the day began, intended to do: he signed an agreement in which he promised not to use violence. His policemen understood, perhaps better than he, what this meant: the end of the regime. They melted away, and he ran for his life. Power shifted to parliament, where a new coalition of oppositionists and dissenters from Yanukovych’s party formed a majority. Reforms began, beginning with the constitution. Presidential elections were called for May.

Still, the propaganda continued. Yanukovych stopped somewhere to record a video message, in Russian, claiming that he was the victim of a Nazi coup. Russian leaders maintained that extremists had come to power, and that Russians in Ukraine were under threat. Although the constitutional transition is indeed debatable in the details, these charges of a right-wing coup are nonsense.

The Ukrainian far right did play an important part in the revolution. What it did, in going to the barricades, was to liberate itself from the regime of which it had been one of the bulwarks. One of the moral atrocities of the Yanukovych regime was to crush opposition from the center-right, and support opposition from the far right. By imprisoning his major opponents from the legal political parties, most famously Yulia Tymoshenko, Yanukovych was able to make of democracy a game in which he and the far right were the only players.

The far right, a party called Svoboda, grew larger in these conditions, but never remotely large enough to pose a real challenge to the Yanukovych regime in democratic elections. In this arrangement Yanukovych could then tell gullible westerners that he was the alternative to the far right. In fact, Svoboda was a house opposition that, during the revolution, rebelled against its own leadership. Against the wishes of their leaders, the radical youth of Svoboda fought in considerable numbers, alongside of course people of completely different views. They fought and they took risks and they died, sometimes while trying to save others. In the post-revolutionary situation these young men will likely seek new leadership. The leader of Svoboda,

according to opinion polls, has little popular support; if he chooses to run for president, which is unlikely, he will lose.

The radical alternative to Svoboda is Right Sector, a group of far-right organizations whose frankly admitted goal was not a European future but a national revolution against all foreign influences. In the long run, Right Sector is the group to watch. For the time being, its leaders have been very careful, in conversations with both Jews and Russians, to stress that their goal is political and not ethnic or racial. In the days after the revolution they have not caused violence or disorder. On the contrary, the subway runs in Kiev. The grotesque residences of Yanukovych are visited by tourists, but they are not looted. The main one is now being used as a base for archival research by investigative journalists.

The transitional authorities were not from the right, or even from the western part of Ukraine, where nationalism is more widespread. The speaker of the parliament and the acting president is a Baptist preacher from southeastern Ukraine. All of the power ministries, where of course any coup-plotter would plant his own people, were led by professionals and Russian speakers. The acting minister of internal affairs was half Armenian and half Russian. The acting minister of defense was of Roma origin.

The provisional authorities are now being supplanted by a new government, chosen by parliament, which is very similar in its general orientation. The new prime minister is a Russian-speaking conservative technocrat. Both of the major presidential candidates in the elections planned for May are Russian speakers. The likely next president, Vitali Klitschko, is the son of a general in the Soviet armed forces, best known in the West as the heavyweight champion boxer. He is a chess player and a Russian speaker. He does his best to speak Ukrainian. It does not come terribly naturally. He is not a Ukrainian nationalist.

As specialists in Russian and Ukrainian nationalism have been predicting for weeks, the claim that the Ukrainian revolution is a “nationalist coup,” as Yanukovych, in Russian exile, said on Friday, has become a pretext for Russian intervention. This now appears to be underway in the Crimea, where the Russian flag has been raised over the regional parliament and gunmen have occupied the airports. Meanwhile, Russia has put army battle groups on alert and sent naval cruisers from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea.

Whatever course the Russian intervention may take, it is not an attempt to stop a fascist coup, since nothing of the kind has taken place. What has taken place is a popular revolution, with all of the messiness, confusion, and opposition that entails. The young leaders of the Maidan, some of them radical leftists, have risked their lives to oppose a regime that represented, at an extreme, the inequalities that we criticize at home. They have an experience of revolution that we do not. Part of that experience, unfortunately, is that Westerners are provincial, gullible, and reactionary.

Thus far the new Ukrainian authorities have reacted with remarkable calm. It is entirely possible that a Russian attack on Ukraine will provoke a strong nationalist reaction: indeed, it would be rather surprising if it did not, since invasions have a way of bringing out the worst in people. If this is what does happen, we should see events for what they are: an entirely unprovoked attack by one nation upon the sovereign territory of another.

Insofar as we have accepted the presentation of the revolution as a fascist coup, we have delayed policies that might have stopped the killing earlier, and helped prepare the way for war. Insofar as we wish for peace and democracy, we are going to have to begin by getting the story right.

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*This is the second installment of Timothy Snyder's series on Russian ideology and the Ukrainian revolution. In the [next part](#), Snyder examines Putin's intentions in Crimea.*

March 1, 2014, 11:15 a.m.

## Crimea: Putin vs. Reality

[Timothy Snyder](#)

*This is the third installment in Timothy Snyder's series on Russian ideology and the Ukrainian revolution. Earlier articles examined the Kremlin's [Eurasian ideology](#) and its [propaganda about the Kiev uprising](#).*



Yury Kirnichny/AFP/Getty Images

Ukrainian members of parliament watching Russian President Vladimir Putin's press conference, March 4, 2014

The Russian invasion and occupation of Ukraine's Crimean peninsula is a disaster for the European peacetime order. But more critical still is just what Russian President Vladimir Putin thinks he is doing. The clues are there before us, in the language of the Kremlin's non-stop

propaganda campaign in the Russian media. The repeatedly recycled categories are the “fascist coup” in Ukraine and the “Russian citizens” who suffer under it. Putin’s justification for occupying part of Ukraine, and threatening to invade the entire country, has been to save the Russians there from the fascists.

Let’s consider each of these conceits in turn. Did the current Ukrainian authorities come to power in a fascist coup? As everyone who has followed these events [knows](#), the mass protests against the Yanukovych regime that began in November involved millions of people, from all walks of life. After the regime tried and failed to put down the protests by shooting protestors from rooftops on February 20, EU negotiators arranged a deal whereby Yanukovych would cede power to parliament. Rather than signing the corresponding legislation, as he had committed to do, Yanukovych fled to Russia.

Parliament declared that he had abandoned his responsibilities, followed the protocols that applied to such a case, and continued the process of constitutional reform by itself. Presidential elections were called for May, and a new government was formed. The prime minister is a liberal conservative, one of the two deputy prime ministers is Jewish, and the governor of the important eastern province of Dnipropetrovsk is the president of the Congress of Ukrainian Jewish Organizations. Although one can certainly debate the constitutional nuances, this process was not a coup. And it certainly was not fascist. Reducing the powers of the president, calling presidential elections, and restoring the principles of democracy are the opposite of what fascism would demand. Leaders of the Jewish community have [declared](#) their unambiguous support for the new government and their total opposition to the Russian invasion.

Of the eighteen cabinet posts that have been filled in the new government, three are held by members of the far right party, Svoboda. Its leader had less than 2 percent support in a recent [opinion poll](#)—one that was taken after the Russian invasion of Crimea, an event that presumably would help the nationalists. In any event, this is the grain of truth from which, according to the traditional rules of propaganda, Putin’s “fascist coup” has been concocted.

The second conceit, that of the oppression of Russian citizens in the Ukraine, lacks even this. Over the last few months one Russian citizen has been killed in Ukraine. He was not threatened by Ukrainian protestors or by the current government. Quite the opposite. He was fighting for the Ukrainian revolution, and was killed by a sniper’s bullet.

In any case, since Ukraine does not allow double citizenship, there are few Russian citizens resident in the country. But let’s consider those that are: One notable group are the soldiers and sailors at the military base at Sevastopol. Since these are military men on a military base, they hardly need protection. Another major group are those masked Russian special-forces who are now occupying Crimea. A third are the Russians who have been bused across the border to stage pro-Russian demonstrations and beat Ukrainian students in the cities of eastern Ukraine. A final group of Russian citizens are former Ukrainian riot policemen who took part in the suppression of demonstrations. Having been rewarded for their actions with a Russian passport, they can and do travel to Russia. None of these groups, by any stretch of the imagination, could be plausibly described as a victimized minority requiring protection.



Putin and others blur the category of citizenship by speaking of Russian “compatriots,” a category that has no legal status. By compatriots Putin means people the Russian government claims as Russians—or who, according to the Kremlin, self-identify as Russians—and who therefore need its protection. This sort of argument, the need to protect the *Volksgenossen*, was used to significant effect by Adolf Hitler in 1938 in enunciating German claims to Austria and then to the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia. Hitler’s substitution of ethnicity for state borders led then to the Munich conference, appeasement, and World War II. Russian historian Andrei Zubov has developed the comparison with Nazi aggression further, [likening Putin’s action to the Anschluss](#), and recalling that the Anschluss led to a war that turned against its authors. The parallel has also been [noted](#) by the chief rabbi of Ukraine.

Even if the protection of *Volksgenossen* were legally justified, it is simply not clear who these people might be. It is true that Ukrainians speak Russian, but that does not make them Russian, any more than my writing in English makes me English. The language issue can be confusing. Ukrainian citizens are usually bilingual, in Ukrainian and Russian. Russians, like the targets of their propaganda, are rarely bilingual. So it has been all too easy to equate the capacity to speak Russian with a Russian identity that is in need of protection from Russia. Some citizens of Ukraine of course do see themselves as Russians—about 17 percent of the population—but this does not mean that they are subject to discrimination or indeed that they identify with the Russian state. Even in Crimea, where the emotional connections to the Ukrainian state are weakest, only [1 percent of the population](#) identifies Russia as its homeland.

In a number of recent protests, Russian-speaking Ukrainians and members of the Russian ethnic minority in eastern Ukraine have made clear they categorically reject any claim that they need Russian protection. One petition from Russian speakers and Russians in Ukraine asks Putin to leave Ukrainian citizens alone to solve their own problems. It has been [signed by 140,000 people](#). This might seem remarkable, since everyone signing it knows that he or she will be in the bad graces of the Russian authorities if Russia completes its invasion. But it makes perfect sense. Russians in Ukraine enjoy basic political rights, whereas Russians in the Russian Federation do not.



Sergii Kharchenko/NurPhoto/Corbis

Unmarked Russian forces surrounding a Ukrainian marine base in Perevalne, Crimea, March 6, 2014

In view of its patent absurdity, why is this propaganda so important to Putin's regime? Most obviously, propaganda serves the technical purpose of preparing the way for war. An excellent propaganda apparatus, such as the Russian one, can find ways to repeat its message over and over again in slightly different ways and formats. Plenty of people in the West now spread Russian propaganda, sometimes for money, sometimes from ignorance, and sometimes for reasons best known to themselves. Those who repeat the Russian propaganda conceits do not need to convince everyone, only to set the terms of debate. If people in free societies have their discussions framed for them by rulers of unfree societies, then they will not notice the history unfolding around them (a revolution just happened in Europe!) or sense the urgency of formulating policy in a desperate situation (a European country has just invaded another!). Propaganda can serve this technical purpose no matter how absurd it is.

But propaganda has a deeper and more important function. Propaganda, at least in the old Soviet Union, was not an edited version of reality, but rather a crucial part of the endeavor to create a different reality. When we refute propaganda with facts and arguments, and even when we discuss its social function, we are inhabiting a certain mental world; we accept the constraints of observation and reason at the outset and seek to change our situation on the basis of what we think we can see and understand. But this is not the only possible psychic reality. In the Soviet Union, the assumption among many who believed in the promise of communism was that the future was as real if not more real than the present. Soviet propaganda was not a version of the world in which we live but rather a representation of the world to come. When we see Russia's current propaganda in this way, we understand why its authors are utterly untroubled by what might appear to be factual errors and contradictions.

Take the idea of Jewish Nazis, which must be taken on if the current Kremlin propaganda about the revolution in Kiev is to have any logical basis. The claim is that Nazis made a coup; the observable reality is that some of the people now in power are Jews. And then we evince our skepticism that Jews are Nazis or that a Nazi coup would put Jews at the top of the Ukrainian state apparatus.

But in the ideology of the Soviet Union and its communist allies, the identification of Jews with Nazis was convenient for those who were in power, and so Jewish Nazis became a propaganda reality. In the years before Stalin's death Israel became part of an international plot that was directed by fascists in the capitalist West. After the Six-Day War the Soviets presented Israeli soldiers and citizens as imitators of the Wehrmacht and the SS. This propaganda was followed by the expulsion of Jews from communist Poland. The fact that Jews left Poland for Israel and the US was presented as evidence that they were fascists all along. The regimes found it politically useful for their own future to target Jews, and therefore Jews, so to speak, were made to become Nazis.

Propaganda is thus not a flawed description, but a script for action. If we consider Putin's propaganda in these Soviet terms, we see that the invasion of Crimea was not a reaction to an actual threat, but rather an attempt to activate a threat so that violence would erupt that would change the world. Propaganda is part of the action it is meant to justify. From this standpoint, an invasion from Russia would lead to a Ukrainian nationalist backlash that would make the Russian story about fascists, so to speak, retrospectively true. If Ukraine is unable to hold elections, it looks less like a democracy. Elections are scheduled, but cannot be held in regions occupied by a foreign power. In this way, military action can make propaganda seem true. Even the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe is unable to fulfill an observation mission.

Indeed, in his March 4 press conference, Putin claimed that the Ukrainian state no longer exists as such, and therefore is not protected by treaties or law. This is quite a radical position, recalling the conclusions that Nazi lawyers drew about Poland after the German invasion of that country in 1939. The position of statelessness would seem to authorize any military action whatsoever without legal restrictions, since Ukraine is in this view a lawless zone.

When the parliament of the Russian Federation (in an appropriately old-fashioned Soviet-style unanimous vote) authorized Putin to use military force throughout Ukraine, it defined the war aim as the restoration of "social and political normality." This is effective rhetoric, as it slips in the implication that what is actually happening in the world, the actual politics and society of actual Ukraine, is not normal. It is also a formulation with terrifying implications. How much violence and how many generations would be necessary before Ukraine society was "normalized," that is, until the supposedly artificial and Western idea of democracy was eliminated, and the supposedly invented Ukrainian national identity was forgotten? The costs to Russians and Ukrainians alike would be staggering, almost unbelievable.

We might not see the new reality that the Russian propaganda is preparing the ground for, but it seems likely that Putin, at least at times, is already inhabiting it. German Chancellor Angela Merkel—an East German and a Russian speaker who knows a thing or two about communism—

has remarked that Putin was living “in another world.” But what if the propaganda, as effective as it has been in dulling the sensibilities of Westerners, fails to bring that world into being?

As Putin sat slouched in his chair at his press conference, shifting between clever one-liners and contradictory constructions, he seemed to be struggling to reconcile tactics and ideology. On the one hand, he has been an extremely good tactician, far more nimble and ruthless than almost anyone with whom he deals. He carried off his plan in Crimea with panache. He broke all the rules in an act of violence that should have opened a space for the true world, the world he wants, the glorious Russian gathering of Russian lands and peoples.

Yet dramatic action did not summon the envisioned new reality to life. Ukraine did not reveal itself to be a Russian land unhappily and temporarily ruled by a few fascists whose coup could be undone. It looks instead like a place where the revolutionary mood has been consolidated by a foreign invasion. As the chief rabbi of Ukraine [put it](#) a few days ago: “There were many differences of opinion throughout the revolution, but today all that is gone.” He continued: “We’re faced by an outside threat called Russia. It’s brought everyone together.”

There are now protests against the Russian occupation throughout the country, even in the south and east, where most people watch Russian television and where the economy is closely linked to Russia. Ukrainians who just a few days ago were in conflict with one another over their own revolution are now protesting together under the same flag. There have been violent clashes, as for example in Kharkiv, but these have been caused by [busloads of Russians](#) brought from across the border. It seems unlikely that the beatings of Ukrainian students by Russian “tourists” (as the Ukrainians, with typical humor, call them) will lead Ukrainians to think that they are Russian compatriots.

The unmarked uniforms of the Russian special forces in Crimea tell this story all by themselves. Theirs was supposed to be the rapid gesture that changed the world. But with each day that passes those ski masks and unmarked uniforms look instead like symbols of shame, hesitation, lack of responsibility—indeed denial of reality. In the Crimean sunshine black ops begin to look a little gray. It must have been enjoyable for Putin to run an operation in which his troops could pretend to be from nowhere. But it was oddly childish of him to deny, in his press conference, what everyone knew: that the troops were Russians. It was as though he wanted the tactical play to last as long as possible, to dream just a bit longer. Ukrainian sailors in Crimea [answered him quite sharply](#), in brisk Russian sentences much better formulated than Putin’s own.

The [costs](#) of what Russia has done are very real, for Europe, for Ukraine, and for Russia itself. Russian propaganda has elegantly provided a rationale for Russian tactics and articulately defined a Russian dream for Ukraine. But in the end propaganda is all that unites the tactics and the dream, and that unity turns out to be wishful. There is no actual policy, no strategy, just a talented and tortured tyrant oscillating between mental worlds that are connected only by a tissue of lies. Putin faces a choice: use far more violence, in the hope that another surge will finally make the dream come true, or seek an exit in which he can claim some victory—which would be wise but deflating. He appears to feel the weight of this choice.

March 7, 2014, 1:25 p.m.