

Nationalism and fascism in Ukraine: A historical overview

Part two

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This is the second of a two-part article. Part one was posted June 9.

The Ukrainian fascists during the Cold War

Immediately after World War II, the American secret service and military began recruiting high-ranking Nazis and Nazi collaborators for the ideological, political and military struggle against the Soviet Union. Fascists and war criminals from Germany and Eastern Europe who had been directly involved in the Holocaust and the murder of millions of Soviet civilians were utilized for covert activities by the US intelligence agencies or worked for propaganda outlets like Radio Free Europe.

According to Harry Rositzke, who was responsible at the CIA for secret operations inside the Soviet Union, “any bastard” was good “as long as he’s anti-Communist.” [6] The network that the CIA built up in the 1940s and 1950s in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union rested heavily on the web of Nazi collaborators.

A key role was played by Reinhard Gehlen, who had led Hitler’s military intelligence service on the Eastern Front and later became the first president of West Germany’s Federal Intelligence Agency (BND), responsible for foreign intelligence operations. From 1946, he worked for Washington and was able to utilise his old contacts among Ukrainian collaborators, within the anti-Soviet army of Russian General Vlasov, and within other Nazi networks.

The CIA’s first large-scale projects to destabilise the Soviet Union included intervention in the Ukrainian civil war. The predecessor to the CIA, the OSS, together with the British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS), had already supplied the underground war being waged by the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) and the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists-Bandera (OUN-B) with materiel and logistics before the end of the world war. As well as military training, this included the parachute drop of agents into Soviet and Polish territory. [7] The guerrilla war in Ukraine became the prototype for similar operations by the CIA throughout the world during the Cold War.

The most important UPA liaison officer for the CIA was Mykola Lebed, whom American military intelligence had described in 1946 as a “well known sadist and collaborator of the Germans.” [8] In 1949, the CIA sponsored his entry into the United States and covered up his war crimes. In emigration, he led the OUN-Z, a split-off from Bandera’s arm of the OUN, which was funded by the United States. He provided the contact between the US and the UPA fighters.

After 1953, Lebed was involved in the management of the émigré publishing house Prolog, financed by the CIA, which disseminated nationalist, anticommunist and historically revisionist literature. From 1945 to 1975, Prolog also published material in Munich depicting the Ukrainian fascists as freedom fighters against communism and either denying or varnishing their participation in war crimes.

Since 1943, the UPA has worked on the myth of the “democratic freedom fighter” to make itself acceptable as an ally of American imperialism. The standard lie runs: the OUN/UPA fought for democracy against both the Nazis and the communists.

The Swedish historian Per Anders Rudling writes of the propaganda of the fascistic Ukrainian diaspora: “The line between scholarship and diaspora politics was often blurred, as nationalist scholars combined propaganda and activism with scholarly work. Lebed’s circle never condemned the crimes or the mass murders of the OUN, let alone admitted that they had taken place. On the contrary, it made denial, obfuscation, and white-washing of the wartime activities of the OUN and the UPA a central aspect of its intellectual activities.” [9]

For years, “The main conduits for smuggling” literature produced by the Western secret services “into Soviet Ukraine and Lviv in Western Ukraine were through Poland and Czechoslovakia.” [10]

When Polish-born Zbigniew Brzezinski became President Jimmy Carter’s national security adviser, the US increased its funding for anti-Soviet Ukrainian propaganda. In addition to literature and radio broadcasts, videocassettes were produced.

Under President Reagan, the strategy of destabilising the Soviet Union by boosting the nationalities question was intensified. The CIA produced material that was addressed to different ethnic groups in the Soviet Union and encouraged separatist-nationalist tendencies. In 1983, President Reagan received OUN-B leader and war criminal Yaroslav Stetsko at the White House, pledging, “Your struggle is our struggle. Your dream is our dream.” [11]

According to the Ukrainian nationalist historian Taras Kuzio, Prolog was able to produce \$3.5 million worth of propaganda in the Soviet Ukraine thanks to the financial support of the US. This paid for publications and the use of new technologies, which, according to Kuzio, “had a great impact upon sustaining and increasing anti-regime activities and opposition groups in the late 1980s in the final push towards Ukrainian independence.” [12]

In West Germany, the BND, in which countless former Nazis were active, supported exiled nationalists in their anti-Soviet work. In Munich, where the BND is headquartered, a Ukrainian émigré centre was established after the war that distributed propaganda literature. Bandera and Stetsko, the two most important OUN-B leaders, also lived there under false names. In October 1959, Bandera was uncovered by the Soviet KGB and murdered in Munich. Stetsko, the exiled leader of the OUN-B, lived there until his death in 1986.

Many academics have covered up Western cooperation with Ukrainian fascists. During the 1950s, many books were published about the Second World War concealing the role of collaborators in Ukraine and Eastern Europe, or glorifying them. The media, too, largely kept quiet.

In his 1988 book *Blowback: America's Recruitment of Nazis and Its Effects on the Cold War*, American journalist Christopher Simpson, who uncovered the network of old Nazis in the service of the CIA, noted:

“Until recently, the US media usually could be counted on to maintain a discreet silence about émigré leaders with Nazi backgrounds accused of working for the CIA. According to declassified records obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, several mass media organizations in this country—at times working in direct concert with the CIA—became instrumental in promoting Cold War myths transforming certain exiled Nazi collaborators of World War II into ‘freedom fighters’ and heroes of the renewed struggle against communism.” [13]

Today’s war propaganda glorifying the fascists in Ukraine as model democrats and freedom fighters stands in this tradition.

The rise of Svoboda after 1991

After independence in 1991, Ukraine, like the rest of the former Soviet Union, saw far-right groups springing up like mushrooms. These ultra-right forces were encouraged by the imperialist powers and the Ukrainian state.

A systematic rehabilitation of the OUN and UPA began in the 1990s. In 1997, under the second Ukrainian president, Leonid Kuchma, a government commission on the OUN and UPA was established in which prominent historians participated. The reports produced by the commission in 2000 and 2005 whitewashed the role of the fascists, especially the OUN-B.

The commission’s objective was the ideological preparation of a law giving veterans of the Red Army and the OUN/UPA equal status. The breakthrough in the rehabilitation of these forces followed under President Viktor Yushchenko, who came to power in 2004 as a result of the Western-backed “Orange Revolution.” He then passed the law giving them the imprimatur of the state.

Svoboda supported Yushchenko in the “Orange Revolution.” Its chairman, Oleh Tyahnybok, elected as an independent parliamentary deputy, joined Yushchenko’s bloc *Nasha Ukraina* (Our Ukraine) and became a member of the parliamentary budget committee.

At that time, Tyahnybok said of the UPA/OUN-B veterans: “You fought against Moskali (a derogatory term for Russians), Germans, Yids and other scum... You are feared by the Mafia of the Moskali-Yids in the Ukraine the most.” This speech can be found on YouTube.

As a result of public pressure, Yushchenko’s bloc was unable to keep Tyahnybok and expelled him the same year. However, criminal charges for incitement were rejected.

Tyahnybok’s party was formed in 1991 under the name Social-National Party of Ukraine (SNPU) through the merger of various right-wing groups and student bodies. It renamed itself Svoboda (freedom) shortly before the Orange Revolution.

Immediately after he took office, Yushchenko began a broad-based campaign to rehabilitate the Ukrainian fascists and their collaboration with the Nazis. In July 2005, he founded an “Institute of National Remembrance,” committed the Ukrainian secret service SBU (once part of the KGB) to carry out propaganda, and supported the establishment of a Museum of the Former Soviet Occupation. As the director of the institute, he appointed Volodymyr Viatrovych, who as an ultranationalist activist was also director of the Centre for Research of the Liberation Movement, an institution of OUN-B successors. [14]

Several OUN and UPA fighters and nationalist leaders like Symon Petliura were officially honoured, with the state producing special stamps and commemorative coins bearing their portraits.

During his last year in power, Yushchenko ensured that the mass media, such as Channel 5, gave Svoboda a disproportionate amount of coverage. Tyahnybok and party ideologist Yuriy Mykhalchyshyn appeared on popular talk shows such as “Velyka polityka” (Big Politics) and “Shuster

Live.” Especially following Svoboda’s electoral success in western Ukraine in 2009, the party achieved widespread media coverage. [15]

Yushchenko had monuments built in Lviv and Ternopil to commemorate war criminal Stepan Bandera, whom he declared to be a hero of Ukraine just days before the end of his presidency in 2010. After protests from Poland and the EU, the new president, Viktor Yanukovych, rescinded this honour, as well as that for the fascist Roman Shukhevych.

Swedish historian Per Anders Rudling described the ideological climate in 2013 with the words: “The hegemonic nationalist narrative is reflected also in academia, where the line between ‘legitimate’ scholarship and ultra-nationalist propaganda often is blurred. Mainstream book stores often carry Holocaust denial and anti-Semitic literature, some of which finds its way into the academic mainstream.” [16]

The Yushchenko regime’s collaboration with fascists was not limited to Svoboda. The openly anti-Semitic Congress of Ukrainian Nationalists (KUN), founded in 1992 as the successor organisation to the OUN with the participation of Stetsko’s widow Slava, joined Yushchenko’s bloc *Our Ukraine* in 2002 and remained in parliament until 2012. Party Chairman Svarytsh was in the first government of Yulia Tymoshenko and was justice minister in 2006 in Yanukovych’s anti-crisis alliance.

Under these conditions, Svoboda was able to triple its membership between 2004 and 2010, according to its own figures. Nonetheless, the party performed only modestly in elections. In the 2007 parliamentary elections, Svoboda won 0.78 percent of the vote, and in presidential elections in 2009, 1.43 percent.

By contrast, its vote in regional elections in western Ukraine was significantly higher. In local elections in 2010, the party achieved between 20 and 30 percent of the vote in eastern Galicia, and won 5.2 percent nationally. Since then, Svoboda’s stronghold has been the city of Lviv, where the OUN-B proclaimed the short-lived independent Ukraine in 1941.

In parliamentary elections in October 2012, which had the lowest turnout (58 percent) since independence, Svoboda entered the Verkhovna Rada (parliament) as the fourth-largest party, with 10.45 percent of the vote. Its highest vote percentages came from western Ukraine, with totals of between 30 and 40 percent in three administrative regions. On the other hand, the party barely achieved 1 percent in eastern Ukraine. In Lviv, Svoboda achieved more than 50 percent and in Kiev it was the second strongest party.

Svoboda leaves no doubt about its fascist orientation and its glorification of the Nazis. On 29 January 2011, on the occasion of a memorial event for the battle of Kruty in 1918, the party organised a large torchlight procession with autonomous right-wing groups and Nazi symbols.

On 28 April 2011, it celebrated the 68th anniversary of the establishment of the Galician division of the *Waffen-SS*. Along the route of the march, placards proclaimed “the pride of our nation.” The participants, with party ideologist Mykhalchyshyn at their head, chanted, “One race, one nation, one fatherland,” and hailed Bandera, Melnyk and Shukhevych as heroes of Ukraine.

On 30 June 2011, Svoboda commemorated the 70th anniversary of Germany’s invasion of the Soviet Union, as well as Stetsko’s renewal of the Ukrainian nation, in a people’s festival, where mock fighters appeared in SS uniforms.

In addition, Svoboda opened several restaurants in Lviv. In the dining room of one, an oversized portrait of Bandera was hung and jokes about Poles and Jews could be found on the toilet walls. Dishes on offer included “Hands up” (in German) and “battle serenade.” Local ultra-right football fans described Lviv on their banners as “Bandera town.” Streets in Lviv have been named after Nazi collaborators by Svoboda city councillors.

The young party ideologist Yuri Mykhalchyshyn, born in Lviv in 1982,

founded a right-wing think tank in 2005 that he first named after Josef Goebbels and later Ernst Jünger. In his writings, he openly refers to the “heroic” legacy of fascists like Evgen Konovalets, Stepan Bandera and Horst Wessel. He has described the Holocaust as a “bright episode in European civilisation.”

The government and media’s hailing of fascism, which in Ukraine claimed millions of victims, has been met with disgust and opposition by large sections of the population. By contrast, the Western powers portrayed the Yushchenko regime, which pressed for the ideological and political rehabilitation of fascism, as a model democracy. At the same time, Svoboda and the right-wing paramilitary Right Sector received support from Western intelligence services and parties.

Svoboda maintains close ties to the far-right German NPD (National Democratic Party), which was described by judges in 2003 as a “state organisation” because its leadership was full of secret service operatives. In May 2004, the NPD welcomed a Svoboda delegation on a friendly visit to the state parliament in Dresden. The Christian Democratic Union-aligned Konrad Adenauer Foundation also provided Svoboda with a platform. The foundation invited Svoboda members to conferences and seminars on the lessons of the 2012 elections. At the time, Yanukovich had just been reelected.

The US Republican Party also has decades-long connections with Ukrainian fascists. The American government invested large sums of money in the preparation of the coup against Yanukovich. Victoria Nuland, US undersecretary of state for Europe, stated that Washington had “invested” around \$5 billion in political projects in Ukraine over the past two decades.

On May 9, the government-aligned Russian newspaper *Izvestia* reported that a Right Sector member had flown to Washington at the end of April for talks with the US administration. Nuland offered Right Sector \$5-\$10 million to give up its weapons and transform itself into a party. But Dmytro Yarosh, leader of Right Sector, rejected the offer.

The strong support from Western governments for Ukrainian fascists is directed not only against workers in Ukraine, but against workers around the world. Berlin and Washington have deliberately built up fascist forces in Ukraine and are now using them to impose social attacks on the working class and prepare for a major war with Russia.

Notes

[6] Cited by Simpson, 1988, p. 159

[7] Taras Kuzio: US support for Ukraine’s liberation during the Cold War: a study of Prolog Research and Publishing Corporation, in *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, no. 45, 2012, p. 53

[8] Simpson 1988, p. 166

[9] Per Anders Rudling: The OUN, the UPA and the Holocaust: A study in the manufacturing of historical myths, in the *Carl Beck Papers in Russian & Eastern European Studies*, no. 2107 (2011), p. 19. The article is accessible online.

[10] Kuzio, 2012, p. 56

[11] Russ Bellant: *Old Nazis, the New Right and the Republican Party*, Boston 1991, p. 72

[12] Kuzio 2012, p. 61

[13] Simpson 1988, p. 5

[14] Rudling 2013, p. 230

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 244

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 231

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