

Neo-Nazis and the Russia Ukraine Crisis: A genuine Concern or mere Consternation?

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Introduction:

Renowned German sociologist Claus Leggewie in his book published in 2011 discusses the European memory culture. According to him there are seven major circles of European memory and Nazism is one of themⁱ. As an atrocious part of the European past that took place on its soil, Nazism was supposed to be limited to that continent only, but the dominance of Europe over other hemispheres-generally referred to as Eurocentrism- combined together with the influential position of the Jewish community ensured that it became a topic of discussion and critical assessment in other parts of the world too.

Though Nazism officially came to an end with the end of the Second World War, however, both in theory as well as in practice, it doesn't seem to die down completely, and the on-going Russia Ukraine conflict is a prime example of that. This intellectual intervention seeks to shed light on the role and relevance of neo-Nazi groups in the on-going Russia-Ukraine conflict on both sides. Since the neo-Nazi ideology is synonymous with the Right-wing extremism, this article argues that the presence of such groups in Russia-Ukraine conflict has global repercussions too, as it has given a cause to far right extremist groups in other countries to mobilise themselves and join the confrontation going on in Ukraine, be it virtually or physically.

One of the major reasons cited by the Russian president Vladimir Putin for military onslaught on Ukraine was to 'denazify' the country and its leadership. According to him the move was aimed at protecting the people who have been "subjected to bullying and genocide"ⁱⁱ. However, many media reports attest the presence of neo-Nazi militants fighting for Russia and Ukraine, both. It's not that the neo-Nazi factions have emerged overnight in Ukraine or in Russia. Rather, both the countries have had a history of either conniving with or fighting against the Nazi forces. On one hand Ukraine supported the Nazi ideology during the Second World War. The German soldiers who took control of Kyiv in 1941 were welcomed with banners of "Heil Hitler", and some 34,000 Jews along with Roma people and other 'undesirables' were paraded to the outskirts of the city in the name of resettlement and brutally massacred, that came to be known as "Holocaust by bullets" in the annals of historyⁱⁱⁱ. On the other hand Russia established itself as the antithesis of the Nazism during the same period and fought against the forces of Hitler tooth and nail.

The current situation in Russia and Ukraine is not different either. In recent past Ukraine has witnessed Swastika-laden vandalism and eerie marches in Kyiv and other major cities that celebrated Waffen SS. In addition to that, Ukraine has also erected many statues of its nationalists whose legacies are tainted by their connivance with the Nazi ideology vis-à-vis ideologues. Stepan Bandera of Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) is one such controversial figure whose followers actively collaborated with the German army and the SS. People like Roman Sukhevych, a person responsible for the slaughter of hundreds of Jews and Poles or Yaroslav Stetsko, who openly called for the extermination of the Jews in Ukraine are other personalities revered as nationalists in Ukraine. In addition to that, Ukraine also has a large base of battle-hardened battalions like Azov who fought Moscow-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine following Crimea's invasion by Russia. According to the founding leader of Azov

battalion Ukraine's national purpose was to get rid of Jews and other inferior races. In spite of the strong words from the US Congress in 2018 that the aid given to Ukraine can't be used to provide arms, training and other assistance to the Azov battalion, the support to it is continuing unabashedly. Azov is now official member of the Ukrainian National Guard.

As far as Russia is concerned, Dr. Robert Horvath, Professor at La Trobe University writes that the surge of right-wing extremism at other places is well documented; however, the same is not the case about the covert collaboration of Putin's regime with such forces. According to him, it is ironical that on one hand Russian forces were claiming to fight the "Ukronazis", on the other hand "the Russian state was cultivating its own homegrown Nazis"^{iv}. In Russia, the rise of neo-Nazi skinheads coincided with the racist violence which shook the country in the 1990s. Once Putin came to power, he dealt with it in two ways: first, he used the neo-Nazi threat to justify his adaptation of anti-extremism legislation which was later used to target liberal, democratic voices in Russia. Second, he managed to mobilise the radical nationalist militants as a counterweight to an emerging anti-Putin coalition of democrats and left liberals. In fact, Putin used one such group of neo-Nazis called "Ruskii Obraz" to tackle his fierce opponent Alexei Navalny's efforts to build an anti-Putin coalition of like-minded people. As per the reports of Dr. Horvath, Putin's regime turned a blind eye towards atrocities committed by neo-Nazi leaders like Ilya Goryachev and Nikita Tikhinov. Apart from that, it also promoted people like Anna Trigga and Andrei Gulyutin who spearhead the online campaign for the Russian regime. Ann Trigga runs a trolling factory that was held responsible for interfering in the 2016 US presidential elections.

It is apparent from the discussions so far that the on-going war is fought at least on two planes. At one level it is fought on ground with weapons and mercenaries, at another level it is also a war of narratives. Data collected from more than 8,000 Russian websites containing nearly eight million articles about Ukraine since 2014 shows that references to Nazism were relatively flat for eight years and then spiked to unprecedented levels on Feb. 24, the day Russia invaded Ukraine. They have remained high ever since^v. Likewise, social media data provided by Zignal Labs shows a spike in references to Nazism in Russian language tweets that matches the uptick in Russian news media^{vi}. As a result, during the war, Russian citizens have echoed claims about Nazism in interviews, and in a poll published in May by the Levada Center, an independent Russian pollster, 74 % people expressed support for the war. This shows that the coming of digital age has made this narrative war more pervasive and perverse, both. These narratives are pervasive because they are seemingly coming from any nook and corner, and likewise, they are also percolating to faraway places, gathering mass, and thus some momentum amongst the far right extremist groups. At the same time, these narratives are also perverse because they are leading to more hatred, bigotry and anti-Semitic sentiments in the areas concerned and beyond. Attention must be paid to ways in which these narratives can be at least fact-checked for their veracity. Parallel to the negotiations taking place through various diplomatic channels, critical questioning, and consequent, countering of the narratives fuelling propaganda must also be on the to-do list to alleviate the aggression.

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