

The News Media's Ukraine Whitewash Grows Worse

It is hardly a new aspect of the US media's performance regarding foreign conflicts that journalists are willing to sanitize the image of whatever faction Washington favors.

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By **Ted Galen Carpenter**

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The U.S. news media's treatment of the Ukraine issue has long been characterized by flagrant favoritism. Reports from organizations such as **Human Rights Watch**, **Transparency International**, and **Freedom House** showing that Ukraine's actual conduct differed markedly from its carefully crafted image as a dedicated young democracy received little coverage in the mainstream press. That willingness to conceal Ukraine's corruption and authoritarianism has **grown even worse** since the outbreak of war with Russia. Media coverage moved quickly from ignoring or minimizing inconvenient information about Kyiv's political and economic system to channeling outright Ukrainian propaganda.

For example, multiple unfiltered stories from *Ukrayinska Pravda* and other Ukrainian news outlets have become a nearly daily feature on Yahoo's news feed. Official statements and press releases from Ukraine's government also appear on Yahoo and other outlets, frequently without an acknowledgment that the accuracy of those accounts could not be confirmed. Contents in the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, which set the agenda and tone throughout much of the US news media on any issue, similarly have conveyed a solidly pro-Ukraine perspective. Moreover,

there are very few competing accounts in those outlets from Russian news sources or even from American analyses that challenge the dominant narrative.

The willingness of the US press to foster a favorable image of Ukraine knows few bounds. During the early weeks of the war, American news outlets even circulated the story about the “Ghost of Kyiv” – the fighter pilot who supposedly became an ace in a matter of days by shooting down numerous Russian warplanes. That account had all the earmarks of transparent propaganda, and the Ukrainian military ultimately **conceded that the story was fictional**. In the meantime, however, it had served its purpose well as propaganda for credulous Western audiences, and the US press aided that effort. Indeed, the coverage of Kyiv’s retraction of the story was noticeably limited.

An especially egregious performance has occurred with respect to the role of the Azov battalion (now the Azov regiment) in Ukraine’s defense effort. The Azov battalion was **notorious for years** before the Russian invasion as a bastion of extreme nationalists and outright Nazis. That aspect proved to be more than just a source of embarrassment for Ukraine’s supporters when the unit became a crucial player in the battle for the city of Mariupol. The Western (especially US) press sought to portray Ukraine’s resistance to the Russian siege as a heroic effort similar to battle of Stalingrad in World War II.

The prominence of the Azov regiment among the defenders certainly should have complicated that media portrayal. Yet most accounts simply focused on the suffering of Mariupol’s population, the heartless villainy of the Russian aggressors, and the tenacity of the city’s brave defenders. Such accounts typically ignored the presence of Azov fighters among the defenders or failed to disclose their ideological pedigree. A *Washington Post* story, for example, merely described the Azov regiment as “**a nationalist outfit**.” Other news accounts referred to the Azov forces in a similar vague manner, occasionally with a perfunctory acknowledgment that the regiment was controversial.

One article, though, engaged in a more extensive whitewash. A May 11, 2022, *Wall Street Journal* **column by Jillian Kay Melchior** featured an interview she had conducted with Bohdan Krotevych, the Azov regiment’s chief of staff in Mariupol. The following passage was typical of the article’s tone.

The Azov Regiment is known for its courage – and controversy. US media has reported that some members espoused neo-Nazi ideology, a claim the Kremlin has taken up. I asked Mr. Krotevych about the unit’s reputation. “Like in other units, including military units of the US

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army, there are some individuals who hold Nazi views," he says. But labeling the entire regiment neo-Nazi "is like calling all Americans racist because the KKK exists in the US"

Amazingly, Melchior let that absurd, self-serving statement pass without making an effort to provide a clarification or rebuttal. Even a brief counterpoint might have mentioned that the Azov regiment uses banners and insignia that **bear a striking resemblance** to counterparts used by the Nazi SS and other portions of Adolf Hitler's regime. Most Americans (much less the US military) do not openly display KKK regalia. The rest of the story is nearly as defective, allowing Krotevych to come across to readers as a heroic figure.

It is hardly a new aspect of the US media's performance regarding foreign conflicts that journalists are willing to sanitize the image of whatever faction Washington favors. Most of the mainstream media did that with respect to the **Kosovo Liberation Army** during the conflict in the Balkans. The same has been true of news stories and commentaries on insurgents trying to unseat Syria's president Bashar al-Assad. Very few accounts accurately describe the most influential components of the rebel forces **as the jihadists that they are**.

However, the coverage of the Ukraine war threatens to achieve a new low in media integrity and credibility. When the establishment press whitewashes the behavior of outright neo-Nazis, something is terribly amiss.

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