The reality of neo-Nazis in Ukraine is far from Kremlin propaganda

BY LEV GOLINKIN, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR - 11/09/17 4:00 PM ET

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As the Trump administration mulls sending weapons to Ukraine, the question of far-right forces employed by the Kiev government has returned to the forefront. Some Western observers claim that there are no neo-Nazi elements in Ukraine, chalking the assertion up to propaganda from Moscow. Unfortunately, they are sadly mistaken.

There are indeed neo-Nazi formations in Ukraine. This has been overwhelmingly confirmed by nearly every major Western outlet. The fact that analysts are able to dismiss it as propaganda disseminated by Moscow is profoundly disturbing. It is especially disturbing given the current surge of neo-Nazis and white supremacists across the globe.

The most infamous neo-Nazi group in Ukraine is the 3,000-strong Azov Battalion, founded in 2014. Prior to creating Azov, its commander, Andriy Biletsky, headed the neo-Nazi group Patriot of Ukraine, members of which went on to form the core of Azov. Biletsky had stated that the mission of Ukraine is to "lead the White Races of the world in a final crusade for their survival … against the Semite-led Untermenschen."

{mosads}Azov's logo is composed of two emblems — the wolfsangel and the Sonnenrad — identified as neo-Nazi symbols by the Anti-Defamation League. The wolfsangel is used by the U.S. hate group Aryan Nations, while the Sonnenrad was among the neo-Nazi symbols at this summer's deadly march in Charlottesville.

Azov's neo-Nazi character has been covered by the New York Times, the Guardian, the BBC, the Telegraph and Reuters, among others. On-the-ground journalists from established Western media

outlets have written of witnessing SS runes, swastikas, torchlight marches, and Nazi salutes. They interviewed Azov soldiers who readily acknowledged being neo-Nazis. They filed these reports under unambiguous headlines such as "How many neo-Nazis is the U.S. backing in Ukraine?" and "Volunteer Ukrainian unit includes Nazis."

How is this Russian propaganda?

The U.N. and Human Rights Watch have accused Azov, as well as other Kiev battalions, of a litany of human rights abuses. In 2016, the Simon Wiesenthal Center caught Azov trying to recruit neo-Nazis in France; Brazilian authorities have uncovered similar attempts in Brazil. Azov's official page on VK, a social media site used in Ukraine and Russia, features images of a white power tattoo and the Totenkopf symbol used by SS concentration camp guards and neo-Nazis today.

How is this Russian propaganda?

Ukraine's far right, which encompasses more than Azov, regularly stages torchlight marches in honor of World War II-era Nazi collaborators (imagine Charlottesville, but with thousands of participants). On Jan. 1, Jewish media reported marchers chanting "Jews Out!" Last month, Radio Free Europe (RFE) — surely not an arm of the Kremlin — reported 20,000 marchers carrying torches in honor of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, which, according to RFE, "carried out vicious acts of ethnic cleansing in which tens of thousands of ethnic Poles in the region were killed." RFE mentioned journalists spotting Nazi salutes during the march.

Kiev's rehabilitation of Nazi collaborators — a hallmark of European far right movements — has been condemned by Jewish organizations including the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Simon Wiesenthal Center, the National Coalition Supporting Eurasian Jewry, Yad Vashem, and the World Jewish Congress.

This is not Russian propaganda.

The accusations of being duped by Russia have even extended to Congressman John Conyers (D-Mich.), who cosponsored an amendment barring the U.S. from providing training and support to Azov in 2015. Some bloggers have gone on to insinuate Conyers was "snookered" or, worse, doing Vladimir Putin's bidding.

I'm not going to speculate on Conyers' motives. I must, however, point out that he is a civil rights legend who was closely associated with Dr. Martin Luther King, cofounded the Congressional Black Caucus, led the campaign to make MLK Day a national holiday, and employed Rosa Parks for two decades.

Hurling sinister accusations against an African-American lawmaker for voting to prevent U.S. armed forces from aiding a neo-Nazi battalion is a bit strange. Maybe Russia snookered Conyers. Maybe Russia also snookered him into cofounding the Congressional Black Caucus. Or maybe he's just not a fan of arming white supremacist paramilitaries. We could wager he'd be against arming Richard Spencer's followers, too.

The odious Russian media tried to paint Ukraine as a land of Nazis, though that is patently wrong. Ukraine has a thriving Jewish community, and its far-right is still on the fringe. It's the same in America. Yet, despite the fact that only a tiny percentage of Americans are neo-Nazis, our pundits and politicians didn't mince words condemning the Charlottesville march.

It's difficult, if not impossible, to imagine mainstream media describing reports on Charlottesville as propaganda and questioning the motives of lawmakers who try to counter today's alarming surge of white supremacy. Why shouldn't we view Ukraine — a nation to which we send billions in foreign aid — in light of the same standards?

Lev Golinkin arrived to the United States as a child refugee from the Soviet Union. He is the author of A Backpack, a Bear, and Eight Crates of Vodka (Doubleday).