Ukraine's 'Dr. Strangelove' Reality

Exclusive: The horrendous fire in Odessa, killing dozens of ethnic Russians protesting against the U.S.-backed coup regime in Kiev, has lurched the country closer to full-scale civil war and disrupted the American media's efforts to deny the existence of pro-regime neo-Nazis, Robert Parry reports.

By Robert Parry

As much as the coup regime in Ukraine and its supporters want to project an image of Western moderation, there is a "Dr. Strangelove" element that can't stop the Nazism from popping up from time to time, like when the Peter Sellers character in the classic movie can't keep his right arm from making a "Heil Hitler" salute.

This brutal Nazism surfaced again on Friday when right-wing toughs in Odessa attacked an encampment of ethnic Russian protesters driving them into a trade union building which was then set on fire with Molotov cocktails. As the building was engulfed in flames, some people who tried to flee were chased and beaten, while those trapped inside heard the Ukrainian nationalists liken them to black-and-red-striped potato beetles called Colorados, because those colors are used in pro-Russian ribbons.

"Burn, Colorado, burn" went the chant.

As the fire worsened, those dying inside were serenaded with the taunting singing of the Ukrainian national anthem. The building also was spray-painted with Swastika-like symbols and graffiti reading "Galician SS," a reference to the Ukrainian nationalist army that fought alongside the German Nazi SS in World War II, killing Russians on the eastern front.

The death by fire of dozens of people in Odessa recalled a World War II incident in 1944 when elements of a Galician SS police regiment took part in the massacre of the Polish village of Huta Pieniacka, which had been a refuge for Jews and was protected by Russian and Polish partisans. Attacked by a mixed force of Ukrainian police and German soldiers on Feb. 28, hundreds of townspeople were massacred, including many locked in barns that were set ablaze.

The legacy of World War II especially the bitter fight between Ukrainian nationalists from the west and ethnic Russians from the east seven decades ago is never far from the surface in Ukrainian politics. One of the heroes celebrated during the Maidan protests in Kiev was Nazi collaborator Stepan Bandera, whose name was honored in many banners including one on a podium where Sen. John McCain voiced support for the uprising to oust elected President

Viktor Yanukovych, whose political base was in eastern Ukraine.

During World War II, Bandera headed the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists-B, a radical paramilitary movement that sought to transform Ukraine into a racially pure state. OUN-B took part in the expulsion and extermination of thousands of Jews and Poles.

Though most of the Maidan protesters in 2013-14 appeared motivated by anger over political corruption and by a desire to join the European Union, neo-Nazis made up a significant number. These storm troopers from the Right Sektor and Svoboda party decked out some of the occupied government buildings with Nazi insignias and even a Confederate battle flag, the universal symbol of white supremacy.

Then, as the protests turned violent from Feb. 20-22, the neo-Nazis surged to the forefront. Their well-trained militias, organized in 100-man brigades called "the hundreds," led the final assaults against police and forced Yanukovych and many of his officials to flee for their lives.

In the days after the coup, as the neo-Nazi militias effectively controlled the government, European and U.S. diplomats scrambled to help the shaken parliament put together the semblance of a respectable regime, although four ministries, including national security, were awarded to the right-wing extremists in recognition of their crucial role in ousting Yanukovych.

Seeing No Nazis

Since February, virtually the entire U.S. news media has cooperated in the effort to play down the neo-Nazi role, dismissing any mention of this inconvenient truth as "Russian propaganda." Stories in the U.S. media delicately step around the neo-Nazi reality by keeping out relevant context, such as the background of national security chief Andriy Parubiy, who founded the Social-National Party of Ukraine in 1991, blending radical Ukrainian nationalism with neo-Nazi symbols. Parubiy was commandant of the Maidan's "self-defense forces."

When the neo-Nazi factor is mentioned in the mainstream U.S. press, it is usually to dismiss it as nonsense, such as an April 20 column by New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof who visited his ancestral home, the western Ukrainian town of Karapchiv, and portrayed its residents as the true voice of the Ukrainian people.

"To understand why Ukrainians are risking war with Russia to try to pluck themselves from Moscow's grip, I came to this village where my father grew up," he wrote. "Even here in the village, Ukrainians watch Russian television and loathe the propaganda portraying them as neo-Nazi thugs rampaging against Russian speakers.

"'If you listen to them, we all carry assault rifles; we're all beating people,' Ilya Moskal, a history teacher, said contemptuously."

In an April 17 column from Kiev, Kristof wrote that what the Ukrainians want is weapons from the West so they can to go "bear-hunting," i.e. killing Russians. "People seem to feel a bit disappointed that the United States and Europe haven't been more supportive, and they are humiliated that their own acting government hasn't done more to confront Russian-backed militants. So, especially after a few drinks, people are ready to take down the Russian Army themselves."

Kristof also repeated the U.S. "conventional wisdom" that the resistance to the coup regime among eastern Ukrainians was entirely the work of Russian President Vladimir Putin, who, Kristof wrote, "warns that Ukraine is on the brink of civil war. But the chaos in eastern cities is his own creation, in part by sending provocateurs across the border."

However, when the New York Times finally sent two reporters to spend time with rebels from the east, they encountered an indigenous movement motivated by hostility to the Kiev regime and showing no signs of direction from Moscow. [See Consortiumnews.com's "Another NYT 'Sort of' Retraction on Ukraine."]

Beyond the journalistic risk of jumping to conclusions, Kristof, who fancies himself a great humanitarian, also should recognize that the clever depiction of human beings as animals, whether as "bears" or "Colorado beetles," can have horrendous human consequences as is now apparent in Odessa.

Reagan's Nazis

But the problem with some western Ukrainians expressing their inconvenient love for Nazis has not been limited to the current crisis. It bedeviled Ronald Reagan's administration when it began heating up the Cold War in the 1980s.

As part of that strategy, Reagan's United States Information Agency, under his close friend Charles Wick, hired a cast of right-wing Ukrainian exiles who began showing up on U.S.-funded Radio Liberty praising the Galician SS.

These commentaries included positive depictions of Ukrainian nationalists who had sided with the Nazis in World War II as the SS waged its "final solution" against European Jews. The propaganda broadcasts provoked outrage from Jewish organizations, such as B'nai B'rith, and individuals including conservative academic Richard Pipes.

According to an internal memo dated May 4, 1984, and written by James Critchlow, a research officer at the Board of International Broadcasting, which managed Radio Liberty and Radio Free Europe, one RL broadcast in particular was viewed

as "defending Ukrainians who fought in the ranks of the SS."

Critchlow wrote, "An RL Ukrainian broadcast of Feb. 12, 1984 contains references to the Nazi-oriented Ukrainian-manned SS 'Galicia' Division of World War II which may have damaged RL's reputation with Soviet listeners. The memoirs of a German diplomat are quoted in a way that seems to constitute endorsement by RL of praise for Ukrainian volunteers in the SS division, which during its existence fought side by side with the Germans against the Red Army."

Harvard Professor Pipes, who was an adviser to the Reagan administration, also inveighed against the Radio Liberty broadcasts, writing on Dec. 3, 1984 "the Russian and Ukrainian services of RL have been transmitting this year blatantly anti-Semitic material to the Soviet Union which may cause the whole enterprise irreparable harm."

Though the Reagan administration publicly defended Radio Liberty against some of the public criticism, privately some senior officials agreed with the critics, according to documents in the archives of the Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley, California. For instance, in a Jan. 4, 1985, memo, Walter Raymond Jr., a top official on the National Security Council, told his boss, National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane, that "I would believe much of what Dick [Pipes] says is right."

What the Reagan administration apparently didn't understand three decades ago and what the U.S. State Department still has not seemed to learn today is that there is a danger in stirring up the old animosities that divide Ukraine, east and west.

Though clearly a minority, Ukraine's neo-Nazis remain a potent force that is well-organized, well-motivated and prone to extreme violence, whether throwing firebombs at police in the Maidan or at ethnic Russians trapped in a building in Odessa.

As vengeance now seeks vengeance across Ukraine, this Nazi imperative will be difficult to hold down, much as Dr. Strangelove struggled to stop his arm from making a "Heil Hitler" salute.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, *America's Stolen Narrative,* **either in** print here **or as an e-book (from** Amazon **and** barnesandnoble.com**). For a limited time, you also can order Robert Parry's trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only $34. The trilogy includes** *America's Stolen Narrative***. For details on this offer,** click here**.**