A Look at Ukraine’s Dark Side

Exclusive: Americans have been carefully shielded from the ugly underbelly of Ukraine’s Maidan uprising in 2014 that overthrew the elected president and installed a U.S.-backed, fiercely anti-Russian regime which has unleashed armed neo-Nazis. But a French documentary has dared to expose this grim reality, as Gilbert Doctorow describes.

By Gilbert Doctorow

A new French documentary depicts a long-denied truth that Ukraine is in the grip of extreme right-wing nationalists who seek to impose what the British scholar Richard Sakwa has called a monist view of nationhood, one which does not accept minorities or heterogeneity. Rainbow politics is not what the Maidan uprising was all about.

Like the Communism which held power in Ukraine before 1992, this new extreme nationalism can impose its will only by violence or the threat of violence. It is by definition the antithesis of European values of tolerance and multiculturalism.

This intimidation is what Paul Moreira’s Canal+ documentary, “Ukraine: The Masks of Revolution,” shows us graphically, frame by frame. That this repression happens to take place under an ideology that incorporates elements of fascism if not Nazism is incidental but not decisive to the power of the documentary. [Click here for the documentary in French; here for a segment with English subtitles.]

But what Moreira shows as surprising as the contents may be to a Western audience actually represents very basic journalism, reporting on events that are quite well known inside Ukraine even as this dark underbelly of the Maidan “revolution” has been hidden from most Europeans and Americans.

Moreira is a professional documentary filmmaker, not an area specialist. He has done films in many countries including Iraq, Israel, Burma and Argentina. He says at the start of this Canal+ documentary that he was drawn to the subject of Ukraine’s Maidan uprising because he “felt sympathy for these people who demonstrated day after day on the streets in winter conditions.

“They wanted to join Europe, to move away from Russia. They wanted the corrupt President [Viktor] Yanukovych to leave. They hoped for more justice, fewer inequalities. But I was struck by one thing the images of the American diplomat [Victoria] Nuland on Maidan distributing bread. The Free World, its cameras,
sided with the insurgents.”

There were also the discordant images of neo-Nazi symbols and flags. To assess the post-Maidan Ukraine, Moreira decided to go see for himself.

The documentary draws upon his interviews with leaders of the rightist paramilitary groups and extreme nationalist politicians as well as other Ukrainians on both sides of the conflict. He shows the attacks on police by Maidan street fighters before Yanukovych’s overthrow on Feb. 22, 2014, and the May 2, 2014 massacre in Odessa of 46 Russian-speaking demonstrators who opposed the new regime.

He shows a violent protest by nationalist extremists outside the parliament in Kiev and the recent blockade by the Right Sektor militias stopping food and other goods crossing into Crimea, which voted overwhelmingly after the 2014 putsch to leave Ukraine and rejoin Russia. The Crimean blockade was in violation of Ukrainian government policy but was not stopped by the Kiev authorities.

Secretary Nuland’s Cookies

During the course of the film, Moreira intersperses footage of the controlling hand of U.S. officials both before and after the February 2014 coup. Twice we see Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Nuland handing out cookies on the Maidan to encourage the demonstrators in December 2013. We see U.S politicians including Sen. John McCain with neo-Nazi Svoboda party leader Oleh Tyahnybok on a podium in Maidan.

In another scene, Nuland testifies before Congress in May 2014 and is asked by Rep. Dana Rohrabacher, R-California, if she knew there were neo-Nazis in the street violence that led to Yanukovych’s removal. When Nuland was evasive, Rohrabacher asked whether besides the popular Maidan images of mothers and grandmothers with flowers there were very dangerous street fighters and neo-Nazi groups.

Nuland responded, “Almost every color of Ukraine was represented including some ugly colors.” Rohrabacher said he took that as a “yes.”

In September 2015, Moreira covered the annual Yalta European Strategy Meeting in Kiev and tried to get impromptu interviews with prominent Americans, such as Nuland and former CIA boss General David Petraeus, the author of the 2007 “surge” in Iraq and currently a strong advocate for sending offensive weapons to Ukraine.

Moreira succeeded only in getting a sound bite from retired Gen. Stanley McChrystal, who said the task of the day was to improve the militias and
strengthen their ties to the Ukrainian government. Moreira asked McChrystal if he knew that the paramilitaries had attacked the Verhovna Rada (Ukraine’s parliament) the week before. With a dismissive smile before he made his getaway, McChrystal responded, “That’s a problem”

Though Moreira’s documentary presented material that was undeniably true much from the public record it was revelatory for many Westerners familiar only with the pro-Maidan images and commentary carried by the West’s mainstream news media. Because the documentary clashed with this “conventional wisdom,” it immediately became “controversial.”

On Jan. 31, one day before the documentary appeared on Canal+, Le Monde issued a stern rebuke under the title “Paul Moreira gives us a distorted vision of the Ukrainian conflict.”

Benoit Vitkine, the newspaper’s reporter for Ukraine, wrote that the extreme nationalists were only one part of the armed uprising and accused Moreira of focusing too much on their role in the Maidan and its aftermath. Vitkine noted that the Right’s “electoral results are laughable” and denied that they are “the new masters of the Ukrainian streets.”

Key Nazi Role

But there is little doubt that the neo-Nazis and other extreme nationalists played a key role in escalating the Maidan protests into the violent uprising that drove Yanukovych from office. For instance, Andriy Parubiy, the commandant of the Maidan “self-defense forces,” was a well-known neo-Nazi, who founded the Social-National Party of Ukraine in 1991. The party blended radical Ukrainian nationalism with neo-Nazi symbols. Parubiy also formed a paramilitary spinoff, the Patriots of Ukraine, and defended the awarding of the title, “Hero of Ukraine,” to World War II Nazi collaborator Stepan Bandera, whose own paramilitary forces exterminated thousands of Jews and Poles in pursuit of a racially pure Ukraine.

After the Feb. 22 coup, Parubiy was one of four far-right Ukrainian nationalists given control of a ministry, in his case, national security, and he integrated many of the right-wing militias into the National Guard, sending neo-Nazi units such as the Azov Battalion into eastern Ukraine to crush ethnic Russians who resisted the new order in Kiev.

Moreira’s documentary also shows footage of right-wing paramilitaries demonstrating aggressively in the streets outside the parliament and scenes of their illegal blockade at the Crimean border, where they literally did control the streets and roads.
Le Monde’s other argument about how poorly the rightists have fared in elections misses the point about the significance of the Right’s large-scale disruptions and violent attacks thus intimidating the parliament and the government. But that reality is downplayed in the West.

Vitkine also accuses Moreira of omitting “the Russian aggression” against Ukraine, which Vitkine says explains the radicalization of part of the Ukrainian population and the decision of Kiev to arm the battalions of right-wing volunteers. But the neo-Nazi role in the Maidan protests predated any Russian intervention in support of the embattled ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine and Crimea. Russian President Vladimir Putin held a key strategy session on how to respond to the Maidan putsch on Feb. 23, 2014, the day after the coup. Putin and Russia were responding to what they saw as a U.S.-backed overthrow of a democratically elected government on their border; they didn’t instigate the crisis.

Similarly Vitkine rejects Moreira’s charge of U.S. complicity in the rise of the neo-Nazis and Moreira’s acceptance of the Crimean referendum in which 96 percent of the voters favored leaving Ukraine and rejoining Russia. But the results of that referendum have been supported by polls both before and after the referendum, including public opinion samples organized by the U.S. government. There can be no serious doubt that the vast majority of Crimeans wanted out of Ukraine and saw practical benefits in rejoining Russia. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “Crimeans Keep Saying No to Ukraine.”]

Bolstering Propaganda

In other words, Le Monde’s key reporter on Ukraine is attacking Moreira from the standpoint of a narrative written in Washington that is more propaganda than reality. In this sense, the French center left as reflected by Le Monde is no less under the spell of neoconservative ideology than many Democrats in the United States.

That being said, Vitkine does toss one bouquet to Moreira for his treatment of the May 2, 2014 “events” in Odessa, the slaughter of anti-Maidan protesters who sought safety inside the Trade Union Building, which was then set ablaze:

“Even if he overestimates the role of Pravy [Right] Sektor and assigns responsibility for this drama too peremptorily, the film performs a salutary piece of work by dwelling at length on this episode from the post-Maidan days that is often neglected.”

But Vitkine condescendingly mocks Moreira’s self-presentation as “the white knight who is exposing past truths that have been passed over in silence [which]
just doesn’t work. This experienced documentary filmmaker has taken up a real subject. He has chosen to ‘see for himself,’ as he tells us. But he only saw what he wanted to see.”

Moreira’s response to Le Monde and two other critics appeared in French on the site blogs.mediapart.fr and in English translation on the website of newcoldwar.org. He cited the pressure from the Ukrainian authorities for Canal+ not to air the documentary.

He also reasserted his thesis that the right-wing paramilitaries are a great threat to Ukrainian democracy and that to deny their existence and the danger they pose simply to avoid playing “into Russian propaganda is to become a propagandist oneself.” Moreira accused Vitkine of “unusually violent writing.”

After the airing of the documentary, an “Open Letter to Paul Moreira” was published on the website of the French weekly Nouvel Observateur, which has been described as “the French intellectuals’ parish magazine.”

Seven of the 17 journalists who signed the Open Letter work for French state media France 24 and Radio France International. The letter starts and ends with stinging reproaches to Moreira, but the contents in the middle are muddled.

For instance, the letter acknowledges the reality of the central issue raised by Moreira’s documentary: that there is a problem with paramilitaries in Ukraine. However, like Vitkine, the authors wanted to shift the discussion from that reality and find excuses in the war that rendered these paramilitaries heavily armed and a danger to the country’s future, i.e., blaming “Russian aggression.”

Rejecting a Referendum

Like Vitkine, the authors reject the results of the Crimean referendum, pointing to the presence of Russian troops on the peninsula. But they themselves ignore the repeated polls and news reporting by disinterested third parties in the past year validating the results of the 2014 referendum.

They acknowledge that the right-wing paramilitaries were a problem but claim they were brought under control during 2015. This is a dubious assertion given the continuing political instability in Kiev and the apparent extremist influence on the parliament, frustrating the government’s efforts to implement the terms of the Minsk II accords. The authors are silent about Moreira’s footage of the rightists’ blockade at the Crimean-Ukrainian border.

Most emphatically, the authors reject the “theory of overthrow of the government in February 2014 by the paramilitary groups of the extreme right.” In doing so, these journalists claiming expert knowledge of the recent history willfully
ignore the substantial evidence indicating that the Maidan snipers who escalated the violence on Feb. 20, 2014, were rightist false-flag provocateurs intent on enraging both the demonstrators and the government’s Berkut police, some of whom were also targeted and killed.

The letter writers also overlook the critical role of right-wing leader Dmitry Yarosh and his forces in shredding the European Union’s Feb. 21, 2014 agreement with Yanukovych in which the embattled president agreed to reduced powers and new elections.

They do salute Moreira’s coverage of the Odessa massacre, but say vaguely it was not the only incident in Ukraine that has not been adequately investigated. And they say that the French and international press has covered extensively the atrocities in Ukraine, which is not a credible claim.

We might conclude that these 17 journalists have written their Open Letter to safeguard their jobs with the French state media and their continued travel rights to Ukraine, which is essential to their careers. But the story does not end there.

One of the 17 signatories, Gulliver Cragg, who works for the France24 television channel, also published a very curious article on the Moreira documentary in other venues. His side essay was written for the Kyiv Post and put online by the still more dubious stopfake.org, a website devoted to the “struggle against fake information about events in Ukraine,” especially any evidence that puts the U.S.-backed regime in a negative light.

Cragg’s essay opens and closes with harsh words for Moreira. However, in the middle, he has harsh words for the Ukrainian authorities, whom he blames for creating their own public relations disasters by misguided policies, such as: “by naming a suspected neo-Nazi, Vadim Troyan, to be police chief in Kyiv region in Autumn 2014. Or appointing the Right Sector leader Dmytro Yarosh an official Defence Ministry adviser.

“Or allowing the Azov battalion, now integrated into the National Guard, to use the Wolfsangel [neo-Nazi] symbol on their logo. Or failing, as Moreira points out in his documentary, to punish any Ukrainian nationalists for their role in the Odessa tragedy.”

Cragg acknowledges that this might lead outsiders to conclude that the far right has too much influence in Ukraine. Moreover, he blames directly President Petro Poroshenko and Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk for simply not understanding all of this and for not changing their behavior and appointments.

And while Cragg comes back to his conclusion that Moreira is blowing things out
of proportion, he agrees that far-right groups in Ukraine wield influence and that their weapons are cause for concern, “a legitimate topic for foreign reporters.”

**Some Criticism of Ukraine**

Cragg continues: “Ukraine’s leaders and media should engage with this issue and encourage a national debate. How do we define far-right? Where does patriotism end and bigotry begin? Where do we draw the line between activist and extremist? Politicians should be addressing these questions and speaking out against those whose views are not compatible with the European values Ukraine claims to espouse. And, crucially, they should be heard doing so on foreign media.”

And so, grudgingly, even some of Moreira’s critics have come out of their crouches and put forward constructive suggestions. By prompting this, Moreira has performed a praiseworthy service.

Yet, while the French mainstream journalists found the need to chastise one of their own for breaking with the pro-Maidan “group think,” the U.S. mainstream media simply continues to ignore Ukraine’s ugly realities, all the better to fit with the State Department’s prescribed narrative.

Nothing like Moreira’s documentary has appeared on U.S. television or in mainstream U.S. newspapers. The dark side of the Maidan and in particular the role of neo-Nazi groups and other violent extremists in fomenting and achieving the coup d’état have been discussed almost exclusively at alternative and independent outlets, mostly on the Internet.

The editorial boards of the country’s newspapers of record The Washington Post, The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal ensured that newspaper columns and op-ed pages set out almost exclusively Official Washington’s narrative day after day. Opposing views were increasingly choked off, finally getting no space whatsoever in mainstream outlets.

One of the few exceptions in print media was The Nation, where contributing editor and Professor of Russian History emeritus at Princeton and New York University Stephen Cohen delivered detailed critiques of the factual and interpretational errors of the mainstream narrative.

Otherwise heterodox views became accessible only to determined truth seekers exploring the alternative media portals. I name here in particular one devastating critique of the one-sided mainstream narrative that Jim Naureckas published at the media criticism site, Fair.

Needless to say, critical views of the Maidan and its neo-Nazi components got
almost no attention in American broadcast media. No American channel so far has shown the civic courage of a Canal+.

Ukraine’s Diversity

Much as I admire the courage and dedication of Paul Moreira to produce such a valuable documentary focusing on very troubling aspects of the post-Maidan political realities in Ukraine, he is an outsider to the subject matter who has missed some very relevant facts about Ukrainian society before his eyes. His critics have missed the same points due to their ideological persuasions or lacking analytical skills.

The fact is that the population of Ukraine is very diverse. The major split between native Ukrainian speakers in the West of the country and native Russian speakers in the East of the country remains unchanged. It is more than ironic that four of the five leaders of extremist Ukrainian nationalists whom Moreira interviewed or otherwise featured in the documentary were speaking native Russian. Such was the intermix of family traditions and ethnicity in Ukraine until recently. Add to this the very many minorities of other nationalities, including Hungarians and Romanians who are especially numerous in territorial pockets.

The ambition of the post-Maidan government in Kiev and of the nationalist extremists who are maintaining pressure on it through intimidation by their paramilitaries is to forge a monist national identity. This suppression of non-Ukrainian-ethnic minorities can be achieved only by violence and threats of violence.

In this sense, the paramilitaries are only the tip of the iceberg. Violence and intimidation today permeates Ukrainian society across the whole geography of the country. It takes the form of murder of journalist and newspaper editors. Meanwhile, there have been changes in the status of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate as well as to street and city names. Further demonstrating hostility toward ethnic and political diversity, Ukraine has witnessed forcible destruction of war memorials to the “wrong” heroes to erase the shared Russian-Ukrainian traditions and to impose a new politically correct consciousness on a hitherto diverse country. Had Moreira sought to document this, he would have needed another one-hour segment or more.

Instead, Moreira focused on the existence of the aggressive nationalist and neo-Nazi armed movements in present-day Ukraine, a reality that his critics in France don’t deny even as they try to forgive it by alluding to “Russian aggression” and the war in the Donbass.
Their insistence that these extremists are just a small part of the paramilitary battalions, not to mention the general population, as revealed by electoral results, is intentionally misleading. That point would have relevance if Ukraine were a functioning democracy. But the ability of these nationalist extremists to intimidate parliament and operate illegal blockades as they do at the Crimean border proves that Ukraine is not a functioning democracy.

Those are the essential points which emerge from the Canal+ documentary and its aftermath. For this we must express our deep appreciation to Mr. Moreira and the management of the television channel.

Doctorow is the European Coordinator, American Committee for East West Accord, Ltd. His latest book Does Russia Have a Future? (August 2015) is available in paperback and e-book from Amazon.com and affiliated websites. For donations to support the European activities of ACEWA, write to eastwestaccord@gmail.com. © Gilbert Doctorow, 2015