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Fascism, Russia, and Ukraine

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Valery Sharifulin/ITAR-TASS/Corbis

The opposition leader Vitali Klitschko attending a protest rally in Maidan square, Kiev, December 16, 2013

The students were the first to protest against the regime of President Viktor Yanukovych on the Maidan, the central square in Kiev, last November. These were the Ukrainians with the most to lose, the young people who unreflectively thought of themselves as Europeans and who wished for themselves a life, and a Ukrainian homeland, that were European. Many of them were politically on the left, some of them radically so. After years of negotiation and months of promises, their government, under President Yanukovych, had at the last moment failed to sign a major trade agreement with the European Union.

When the riot police came and beat the students in late November, a new group, the Afghan veterans, came to the Maidan. These men of middle age, former soldiers and officers of the Red Army, many of them bearing the scars of battlefield wounds, came to protect “their children,” as they put it. They didn’t mean their own sons and

daughters: they meant the best of the youth, the pride and future of the country. After the Afghan veterans came many others, tens of thousands, then hundreds of thousands, now not so much in favor of Europe but in defense of decency.

What does it mean to come to the Maidan? The square is located close to some of the major buildings of government, and is now a traditional site of protest. Interestingly, the word *maidan* exists in Ukrainian but not in Russian, but even people speaking Russian use it because of its special implications. In origin it is just the Arabic word for “square,” a public place. But a *maidan* now means in Ukrainian what the Greek word *agora* means in English: not just a marketplace where people happen to meet, but a place where they deliberately meet, precisely in order to deliberate, to speak, and to create a political society. During the protests the word *maidan* has come to mean the act of public politics itself, so that for example people who use their cars to organize public actions and protect other protestors are called the *automaidan*.

The protesters represent every group of Ukrainian citizens: Russian speakers and Ukrainian speakers (although most Ukrainians are bilingual), people from the cities and the countryside, people from all regions of the country, members of all political parties, the young and the old, Christians, Muslims, and Jews. Every major Christian denomination is represented by believers and most of them by clergy. The Crimean Tatars march in impressive numbers, and Jewish leaders have made a point of supporting the movement. The diversity of the Maidan is impressive: the group that monitors hospitals so that the regime cannot kidnap the wounded is run by young feminists. An important hotline that protesters call when they need help is staffed by LGBT activists.

On January 16, the Ukrainian government, headed by President Yanukovich, tried to put an end to Ukrainian civil society. A series of laws passed hastily and without following normal procedure did away with freedom of speech and assembly, and removed the few remaining checks on executive authority. This was intended to turn Ukraine into a dictatorship and to make all participants in the Maidan, by then probably numbering in the low millions, into criminals. The result was that the protests, until then entirely peaceful, became violent. Yanukovich lost support, even in his political base in the southeast, near the Russian border.

After weeks of responding peacefully to arrests and beatings by the riot police, many Ukrainians had had enough. A fraction of the protesters, some but by no means all representatives of the political right and far right, decided to take the fight to the police. Among them were members of the far-right party Svoboda and a new conglomeration of nationalists who call themselves the Right Sector (Pravyi Sektor). Young men, some of them from right-wing groups and others not, tried to take by force the public spaces claimed by the riot police. Young Jewish men formed their own combat group, or *sotnia*, to take the fight to the authorities.

Although Yanukovych rescinded most of the dictatorship laws, lawless violence by the regime, which started in November, continued into February. Members of the opposition were shot and killed, or hosed down in freezing temperatures to die of hypothermia. Others were tortured and left in the woods to die.

During the first two weeks of February, the Yanukovych regime sought to restore some of the dictatorship laws through decrees, bureaucratic shortcuts, and new legislation. On February 18, an announced parliamentary debate on constitutional reform was abruptly canceled. Instead, the government sent thousands of riot police against the protesters of Kiev. Hundreds of people were wounded by rubber bullets, tear gas, and truncheons. Dozens were killed.

The future of this protest movement will be decided by Ukrainians. And yet it began with the hope that Ukraine could one day join the European Union, an aspiration that for many Ukrainians means something like the rule of law, the absence of fear, the end of corruption, the social welfare state, and free markets without intimidation from syndicates controlled by the president.

The course of the protest has very much been influenced by the presence of a rival project, based in Moscow, called the Eurasian Union. This is an international commercial and political union that does not yet exist but that is to come into being in January 2015. The Eurasian Union, unlike the European Union, is not based on the principles of the equality and democracy of member states, the rule of law, or human rights.

On the contrary, it is a hierarchical organization, which by its nature seems unlikely to admit any members that are democracies with the rule of law and human rights. Any democracy within the Eurasian Union would pose a threat to Putin's rule in Russia. Putin wants Ukraine in his Eurasian Union, which means that Ukraine must be authoritarian, which means that the Maidan must be crushed.

The dictatorship laws of January 16 were obviously based on Russian models, and were proposed by Ukrainian legislators with close ties to Moscow. They seem to have been Russia's condition for financial support of the Yanukovych regime. Before they were announced, Putin offered Ukraine a large loan and promised reductions in the price of Russian natural gas. But in January the result was not a capitulation to Russia. The people of the Maidan defended themselves, and the protests continue. Where this will lead is anyone's guess; only the Kremlin expresses certainty about what it all means.

The protests in the Maidan, we are told again and again by Russian propaganda and by the Kremlin's friends in Ukraine, mean the return of National Socialism to Europe. The Russian foreign minister, in Munich, lectured the Germans about their support of people who salute Hitler. The Russian media continually make the claim that the

Ukrainians who protest are Nazis. Naturally, it is important to be attentive to the far right in Ukrainian politics and history. It is still a serious presence today, although less important than the far right in France, Austria, or the Netherlands. Yet it is the Ukrainian regime rather than its opponents that resorts to anti-Semitism, instructing its riot police that the opposition is led by Jews. In other words, the Ukrainian government is telling itself that its opponents are Jews and us that its opponents are Nazis.

The strange thing about the claim from Moscow is the political ideology of those who make it. The Eurasian Union is the enemy of the European Union, not just in strategy but in ideology. The European Union is based on a historical lesson: that the wars of the twentieth century were based on false and dangerous ideas, National Socialism and Stalinism, which must be rejected and indeed overcome in a system guaranteeing free markets, free movement of people, and the welfare state. Eurasianism, by contrast, is presented by its advocates as the opposite of liberal democracy.

The Eurasian ideology draws an entirely different lesson from the twentieth century. Founded around 2001 by the Russian political scientist Aleksandr Dugin, it proposes the realization of National Bolshevism. Rather than rejecting totalitarian ideologies, Eurasianism calls upon politicians of the twenty-first century to draw what is useful from both fascism and Stalinism. Dugin's major work, *The Foundations of Geopolitics*, published in 1997, follows closely the ideas of Carl Schmitt, the leading Nazi political theorist. Eurasianism is not only the ideological source of the Eurasian Union, it is also the creed of a number of people in the Putin administration, and the moving force of a rather active far-right Russian youth movement. For years Dugin has openly supported the division and colonization of Ukraine.

The point man for Eurasian and Ukrainian policy in the Kremlin is Sergei Glazyev, an economist who like Dugin tends to combine radical nationalism with nostalgia for Bolshevism. He was a member of the Communist Party and a Communist deputy in the Russian parliament before cofounding a far-right party called Rodina, or Motherland. In 2005 some of its deputies signed a petition to the Russian prosecutor general asking that all Jewish organizations be banned from Russia.

Later that year Motherland was banned from taking part in further elections after complaints that its advertisements incited racial hatred. The most notorious showed dark-skinned people eating watermelon and throwing the rinds to the ground, then called for Russians to clean up their cities. Glazyev's book *Genocide: Russia and the New World Order* claims that the sinister forces of the "new world order" conspired against Russia in the 1990s to bring about economic policies that amounted to "genocide." This book was published in English by Lyndon LaRouche's magazine *Executive Intelligence Review* with a preface by LaRouche. Today *Executive*

Intelligence Review echoes Kremlin propaganda, spreading the word in English that Ukrainian protesters have carried out a Nazi coup and started a civil war.

The populist media campaign for the Eurasian Union is now in the hands of Dmitry Kiselyov, the host of the most important talk show in Russia, and since December also the director of the state-run Russian media conglomerate designed to form national public opinion. Best known for saying that gays who die in car accidents should have their hearts cut from their bodies and incinerated, Kiselyov has taken Putin's campaign against gay rights and transformed it into a weapon against European integration. Thus when the then German foreign minister, who is gay, visited Kiev in December and met with Vitali Klitschko, the heavyweight champion and opposition politician, Kiselyov dismissed Klitschko as a gay icon. According to the Russian foreign minister, the exploitation of sexual politics is now to be an open weapon in the struggle against the "decadence" of the European Union.

Following the same strategy, Yanukovich's government claimed, entirely falsely, that the price of closer relations with the European Union was the recognition of gay marriage in Ukraine. Kiselyov is quite open about the Russian media strategy toward the Maidan: to "apply the correct political technology," then "bring it to the point of overheating" and bring to bear "the magnifying glass of TV and the Internet."

Why exactly do people with such views think they can call other people fascists? And why does anyone on the Western left take them seriously? One line of reasoning seems to run like this: the Russians won World War II, and therefore can be trusted to spot Nazis. Much is wrong with this. World War II on the eastern front was fought chiefly in what was then Soviet Ukraine and Soviet Belarus, not in Soviet Russia. Five percent of Russia was occupied by the Germans; all of Ukraine was occupied by the Germans. Apart from the Jews, whose suffering was by far the worst, the main victims of Nazi policies were not Russians but Ukrainians and Belarusians. There was no Russian army fighting in World War II, but rather a Soviet Red Army. Its soldiers were disproportionately Ukrainian, since it took so many losses in Ukraine and recruited from the local population. The army group that liberated Auschwitz was called the First Ukrainian Front.

The other source of purported Eurasian moral legitimacy seems to be this: since the representatives of the Putin regime only very selectively distanced themselves from Stalinism, they are therefore reliable inheritors of Soviet history, and should be seen as the automatic opposite of Nazis, and therefore to be trusted to oppose the far right.

Again, much is wrong about this. World War II began with an alliance between Hitler and Stalin in 1939. It ended with the Soviet Union expelling surviving Jews across its own border into Poland. After the founding of the State of Israel, Stalin began associating Soviet Jews with a world capitalist conspiracy, and undertook a campaign

of arrests, deportations, and murders of leading Jewish writers. When he died in 1953 he was preparing a larger campaign against Jews.

After Stalin's death communism took on a more and more ethnic coloration, with people who wished to revive its glories claiming that its problem was that it had been spoiled by Jews. The ethnic purification of the communist legacy is precisely the logic of National Bolshevism, which is the foundational ideology of Eurasianism today. Putin himself is an admirer of the philosopher Ivan Ilin, who wanted Russia to be a nationalist dictatorship.

What does it mean when the wolf cries wolf? Most obviously, propagandists in Moscow and Kiev take us for fools—which by many indications is quite justified.

More subtly, what this campaign does is attempt to reduce the social tensions in a complex country to a battle of symbols about the past. Ukraine is not a theater for the historical propaganda of others or a puzzle from which pieces can be removed. It is a major European country whose citizens have important cultural and economic ties with both the European Union and Russia. To set its own course, Ukraine needs normal public debate, the restoration of parliamentary democracy, and workable relations with all of its neighbors. Ukraine is full of sophisticated and ambitious people. If people in the West become caught up in the question of whether they are largely Nazis or not, then they may miss the central issues in the present crisis.

In fact, Ukrainians are in a struggle against both the concentration of wealth and the concentration of armed force in the hands of Viktor Yanukovich and his close allies. The protesters might be seen as setting an example of courage for Americans of both the left and the right. Ukrainians make real sacrifices for the hope of joining the European Union. Might there be something to be learned from that among Euroskeptics in London or elsewhere? This is a dialogue that is not taking place.

The history of the Holocaust is part of our own public discourse, our *agora*, or *maidan*. The current Russian attempt to manipulate the memory of the Holocaust is so blatant and cynical that those who are so foolish to fall for it will one day have to ask themselves just how, and in the service of what, they have been taken in. If fascists take over the mantle of antifascism, the memory of the Holocaust will itself be altered. It will be more difficult in the future to refer to the Holocaust in the service of any good cause, be it the particular one of Jewish history or the general one of human rights.

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