

New York Times Attempts to Whitewash its Role in Publishing Faked Ukraine Photos

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Yesterday, amid rising anger among *New York Times* readers over the newspaper's publication of faked US State Department photos, the *Times* issued a whitewash of its role by its public editor, Margaret Sullivan, titled "Aftermath of Ukraine Photo Story Shows Need for More Caution."

The *Times'* original piece, "Photos Link Masked Men in East Ukraine to Russia," used doctored photos to falsely identify armed pro-Russian protesters in eastern Ukraine as Russian soldiers. In one instance, the *Times* posted photos of two different bearded men, one a protester in Ukraine and the other a Russian fighter in Chechnya, down-sampled to such a low resolution that they appeared to be the same person. In another case, the *Times* published a photo taken in Ukraine but claimed it was taken in Russia to supposedly prove that the fighters in it were Russian.

Since then, Sullivan admits, "some of those grainy photographs have been discredited." She continues: "The *Times* has published a second article backing off from the original and airing questions about what the photographs are said to depict, but hardly addressing how the newspaper may have been misled."

She adds, "It all feels rather familiar—the rushed publication of something exciting, often based on an executive branch leak. And then, afterward, with a kind of 'morning after' feeling, here comes a more sober, less prominently displayed follow-up story, to deal with objections while not clarifying much of anything."

This acknowledgment of similar cases in the past shows, in fact, that the publication of the faked photos was not due to a momentary lack of "caution," but to longstanding journalistic methods that discredit the work of the entire newspaper. As Sullivan writes, the *Times'* excited rush to publish propaganda lies stove-piped by the US government, followed by moves to bury the issue once the lies are exposed, "all feels rather familiar."

The *Times* has served for years as a de facto state propaganda organ, uncritically broadcasting government lies to justify US wars while covering up stories embarrassing to the White House, and using a "public editor" to issue impotent criticisms in the face of popular anger.

In recent years, the *Times* public editor has admitted that reporting by Judith Miller of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, used to justify the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, was false; that the newspaper covered up the Bush administration's operation of an illegal NSA electronic spying program after discussions with the government; and that it decided for two months

to suppress news of the US Marines' 2006 Haditha massacre in Iraq.

These empty *mea culpas* are exercises in damage control, aimed at shielding the *Times* from the anger of its readers while concealing far more than they reveal about the operations of the newspaper and its relations with government military and intelligence agencies. They change nothing about the paper's role.

Times Foreign Editor Joseph Kahn "rightly points out," Sullivan writes, "that the *Times* had made a major commitment to covering the Russia-Ukraine story over the past several months, using as many as 12 staff reporters, many of them on the ground." Sullivan continues: "He [Kahn] calls the coverage 'voluminous, competitive, and excellent.' He rejects the idea that the *Times*' coverage has lacked skepticism and sees this instance as a result of a simple mistake: the State Department's mislabeling."

Sullivan cites Kahn as saying his staff is "on guard" against the example of Judith Miller's reporting. The article was "published on a tight deadline, [Kahn] said, because of competitive pressures."

Kahn's response shows that *Times* staff no longer function as journalists—seeking to establish the facts of the situation and critically examine and challenge state officials' claims—but as state propagandists. Far from being "on guard" against state disinformation, the *Times* took the faked, grainy photos provided by its masters in the State Department and published them on schedule and as ordered, without bothering even to carry out elementary fact-checking.

It does not even occur to figures such as Kahn to be critical of their sources. He apparently takes the view that the *Times* bears no responsibility to check material given to it by the government, but only to transmit material received from the State Department.

If the material turns out to consist of "mis-labeled" photos or other lies, that is simply a "mistake" by the government (not the result of deliberate falsification by the *Times*). That such "mistakes" could lead to a nuclear war between the US and Russia is evidently not a matter of concern to Sullivan, who says nothing of the possible consequences of the fabricated story.

To better appreciate the *Times*' role as a sounding board for US imperialism, it is as important to note the stories it did not publish as the trash it did. For all the *Times*' enormous resources and its 12 reporters working on Ukraine, its articles are not "competitive" or "excellent," but misleading and pedestrian—primarily because its total support for US foreign policy precludes it from writing on the dramatic and tragic events stemming from US imperialism's intervention in Ukraine.

What incisive articles has it published on the character of the fascist Right Sector militia, which led the putsch that installed a US-backed government in Kiev?

Why did it decide to remain silent on CIA Director John Brennan's trip to Kiev, shortly before the regime launched its first crackdown on the eastern Ukrainian protests, leaving it to the Russian media to break the news of the visit?

Why did it not expose as a provocation the anti-Semitic leaflet circulated in Donetsk and falsely attributed to pro-Russian protesters?

One answer comes to mind: the State Department had other priorities.

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