

New York Time's One-Sided Ukraine Narrative

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Ukraine's President-elect Petro Poroshenko.

The U.S. press coverage of the Ukraine crisis has been stunningly biased and one-sided, placing virtually all the blame on Russian President Putin. One of the worst offenders in this journalistic travesty has been the New York Times.

As part of the New York Times' sorry descent into becoming a propaganda sheet for the U.S. State Department, the Times' front-page story on the Ukrainian presidential election offered a near perfect distillation of Official Washington's false narrative on the crisis.

"The special election was called by Parliament to replace Viktor F. Yanukovich, who fled Kiev on Feb. 21 after a failed but bloody attempt to suppress a civic uprising, and whose toppling as president set off Russia's invasion and annexation of Crimea," [wrote](#) David M. Herszenhorn, one of the most consistently biased reporters on Ukraine.

Very little about the Times' summary is either accurate or balanced. It is at best a one-sided account of the tumultuous events over the past several months in Ukraine and leaves out context that would enable a Times' reader to get a more accurate understanding of the crisis.

Indeed, that false narrative, which has now become engrained as American conventional wisdom, has itself become a threat to U.S. interests because, if you believe the preferred storyline, you would tend to support aggressive counter-measures that could have dangerous and counter-productive consequences.

Beyond that, there is the broader risk to U.S. democracy when major news organizations routinely engage in this sort of propaganda. Just in recent years, the U.S. government has launched wars under such fake pretenses, inflicting casualties in faraway lands, engendering profound hatred of the United States, depleting the U.S. Treasury, and maiming and killing American soldiers.

That is why it's important for journalists and news outlets to do all they can to get these kinds of stories right and not just pander to the powers-that-be.

Ukraine's Real Narrative

Regarding Ukraine, the real narrative is much more complex and nuanced than the New York Times described. The origins of the immediate crisis date back to last year when the European Union rashly offered an association agreement to Ukraine, a proposal that elected President Yanukovich considered.

However, when the International Monetary Fund insisted on a harsh austerity plan that would have made the hard lives of the Ukrainian people even harder – and when Russian President Vladimir Putin offered a more generous aid package of \$15 billion – Yanukovich turned away from the EU-IMF deal.

That provoked demonstrations in Kiev from Ukrainians, many from the west, who favored closer ties to Europe and who were tired of the endemic corruption that has plagued Ukraine since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 and since the “shock therapy” capitalism that saw a handful of oligarchs plunder the nation’s wealth and resources.

Though most protesters appeared motivated by a desire for better governance and a hope that an association with Europe would improve their economic prospects, a significant percentage of the crowd on the Maidan came from neo-Nazi and other far-right movements that despised Yanukovich and his ethnic Russian political base for their own reasons, dating back to Ukraine’s split in World War II between pro-Nazi and pro-Soviet forces.

The increasingly disruptive protests on the Maidan were also egged on by U.S. officials and pushed by U.S.-funded non-governmental organizations, some subsidized by the National Endowment for Democracy, whose neocon president Carl Gershman last September had termed Ukraine “the biggest prize” and a key step in undermining Putin inside Russia.

Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland, a neocon who had been an adviser to Vice President Dick Cheney, personally urged on the demonstrators, even passing out cookies at the Maidan. In one speech, she told Ukrainian business leaders that the United States had invested \$5 billion in their “European aspirations.”

Nuland also was caught in an intercepted phone conversation with U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt explaining whom she wanted to see running the government once Yanukovich was gone. Her choice was Arseniy Yatsenyuk or “Yats.”

Sen. John McCain, another prominent neocon, rallied the Maidan protesters while standing near a Svoboda party banner honoring Nazi collaborator Stepan Bandera, whose radical paramilitary force had helped the Nazis expel and exterminate tens of thousands of Poles and Jews during World War II.

The Putsch

Contrary to Herszenhorn’s boilerplate paragraph, the violence was not entirely from the embattled government. Neo-Nazi militias, which had secured weapons and organized themselves into 100-man brigades, launched repeated attacks on the police, including burning some policemen with firebombs.

On Feb. 20, as the violence worsened, mysterious snipers opened fire on both demonstrators and police, killing some 20 people and escalating the confrontation dangerously. Though the Western press jumped to the conclusion that Yanukovich was to blame, he denied ordering the shootings and EU officials later came to suspect that the attacks were done by the opposition as a provocation.

“So there is a stronger and stronger understanding that behind snipers it was not Yanukovich, it was somebody from the new coalition,” Estonia’s Foreign Minister Urmas Paet told European Union foreign affairs chief Catherine Ashton, as [reported by the UK](#)

[Guardian](#).

On Feb. 21, Yanukovich sought to tamp down the violence by signing an agreement with representatives of Germany, France and Poland in which he accepted early elections (so he could be voted out of office) and agreed to reduced presidential powers. He also pulled back the police.

However, when the police were withdrawn, the neo-Nazi militias completed their putsch on Feb. 22, seizing control of government buildings and forcing Yanukovich and his officials to flee for their lives. In effect, the storm troopers controlled the Ukrainian government.

I was told by an international diplomat who was on the ground in Kiev that the Western countries felt there was no choice but to immediately work with the shaken Parliament to put together an interim government, otherwise the “thugs” would remain in charge.

So, Yanukovich was hastily impeached through an illegal process that circumvented the Ukrainian constitution, and the Parliament picked a new government which ceded four ministries, including national security, to the neo-Nazis in recognition of their crucial role in the coup.

To head up this interim government, Yatsenyuk was named prime minister and one of his first orders of business was to enact the IMF austerity plan that Yanukovich had rejected. The intimidated Parliament also approved a ban on Russian as an official language, although that scheme was later dropped.

In other words, the Times misleads its readers when it summarizes the events by simply saying Yanukovich “fled Kiev on Feb. 21 after a failed but bloody attempt to suppress a civic uprising.”

The Aftermath

After the coup, ethnic Russians in the east and south were outraged that their elected president had been removed violently and illegally. In the southern peninsula of Crimea, the local parliament voted to arrange a referendum on secession in order to rejoin Russia, which had controlled Crimea dating back to the 1700s.

Russia did not “invade” Crimea since Moscow already had some 16,000 troops stationed in Crimea under an agreement with Ukraine for Russia to retain its historic naval base at Sevastopol. Russian troops did back up the local Crimean authorities as they planned their referendum which showed overwhelming public support for secession.

It became another U.S. conventional wisdom that the referendum was “rigged” because the turnout was high and the vote in favor of secession was 96 percent. But exit polls showed a similarly overwhelming majority of around 93 percent – and no serious person doubts that most Crimeans favored escaping from the failed Ukrainian state.

Russia then agreed to accept Crimea back into its federation. So, while the Crimean referendum was surely hastily organized, it reflected the popular will and was central to the Russian decision to reclaim the historical peninsula.

Yet, the Times summarized those events as “Russia’s invasion and annexation of Crimea,” creating the image of Russian troops swarming across the border and seizing the territory

against the will of the people.

If Herszenhorn's paragraph were the first time that he or the newspaper had offered such a misleading account on Ukraine or other international hotspots, one might excuse it as just a rushed and careless synopsis. But the summary is only the latest example of the Times' deeply biased pattern, marching in lockstep with the State Department's propaganda themes for years.

The Times' failures in the run-up to the disastrous Iraq War were infamous, particularly the "aluminum tube" story by Michael R. Gordon and Judith Miller. The Times showed similar bias on the Syrian conflict, including last year's [debunked](#) Times' "vector analysis" tracing a Sarin-laden rocket back to a Syrian military base when the rocket had less than one-third the necessary range.

But the Times' prejudice over the Ukraine crisis has been even more extreme. Virtually everything that the Times writes about Ukraine is so polluted with propaganda that it requires a very strong filter, along with additives from more independent news sources, to get anything approaching an accurate understanding of events.

Since the early days of the coup, the Times has behaved as essentially a propaganda organ for the new regime in Kiev and the State Department, blaming Russia and Putin for the crisis. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Will Ukraine Be NYT's Waterloo?](#)"]

Embarrassing Gaffes

In the Times' haste to perform this function, there have been some notable journalistic gaffes such as the Times' front-page [story](#) touting photographs that supposedly showed Russian special forces in Russia and then the same soldiers in eastern Ukraine, allegedly proving that the east's popular resistance to the coup regime in Kiev was simply clumsily disguised Russian aggression.

Any serious journalist would have recognized the holes in the story - since it wasn't clear where the photos were taken or whether the blurry images were even the same people - but that didn't bother the Times, which led with the scoop.

However, only two days later, the scoop [blew up](#) when it turned out that a key photo - supposedly showing a group of soldiers in Russia who later appeared in eastern Ukraine - was actually taken in Ukraine, destroying the premise of the entire story.

Herszenhorn himself has been one of the most biased Times' reporters. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Ukraine, Though the US 'Looking Glass.'](#)"]

Now, since Ukrainian voters - with the exception of those in the rebellious eastern provinces - have selected a new president, billionaire businessman Petro Poroshenko, the question is whether the twisted and distorted U.S. narrative will stop President Barack Obama from taking pragmatic steps to defuse the crisis.

Poroshenko, who has done past business in Russia and knows Putin personally, appears ready to deescalate the crisis with Ukraine's neighbor. After Sunday's election, Poroshenko vowed to repair relations with Russia and Putin, who himself has made conciliatory comments about respecting the election results.

“Most probably the meeting with the Russian leadership will certainly take place in the first half of July,” [said](#) Poroshenko,. “We should be very ready tactically in approach to this meeting, because first we should create an agenda, we should prepare documents, so that it will not be just to shake hands.”

Poroshenko also has voiced a willingness to accept greater federalism that would grant a degree of self-rule to the provinces in eastern Ukraine. And, there are tentative plans for Obama and Putin to meet on June 6 in Normandy around ceremonies honoring the 70th anniversary of D-Day.

Despite these few positive developments, the violence in eastern Ukraine continues to escalate with scores of ethnic Russian separatist rebels and pro-Kiev troops killed in clashes around the Donetsk airport on Monday.

Still, the major remaining obstacle to some reconciliation of the Ukraine crisis may be the deeply biased reporting at the Times and other mainstream American news outlets, which continue to insist that the story has only one side.

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