

U.S Mainstream Media: Selective Outrage over Ukraine POWs

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Some of the original detainees jailed at the Guantanamo Bay prison, as put on display by the U.S. military.

The U.S. news media regularly engages in selective outrage, piously denouncing some adversary for violating international law yet hypocritically silent when worse abuses are committed by the U.S. or allied governments, as the New York Times has shown again.

The New York Times has taken deep umbrage over an unseemly parade staged by ethnic Russian rebels in eastern Ukraine featuring captured Ukrainian soldiers. The Times noted that the Geneva Conventions prohibit humiliation of POWs, surely a valid point.

But the Times - in its profoundly biased coverage of the Ukraine crisis - apparently feels that other aspects of this nasty civil war are less newsworthy, such as the Kiev government's bombardment of eastern Ukrainian cities sending the death toll into the thousands, including children and other non-combatants. Also downplayed has been Kiev's dispatch of neo-Nazi storm troopers to spearhead the urban combat in ethnic Russian towns and cities in the east.

When the Times [finally noticed this street-fighting role of neo-Nazi militias](#), that remarkable fact - the first time armed Nazis were dispatched by any government to kill people in Europe since World War II - was consigned to the last three paragraphs of a long article on a different topic, essentially a throwaway reference.

Similarly, the Kiev regime's artillery fire on residential areas - killing many civilians and, over the weekend, damaging a hospital - has been treated by the Times as a minor afterthought. But Times' readers are supposed to get worked up over the tasteless demonstration in Donetsk, all the better to justify more killing of ethnic Russians.

Though no one was killed or injured during Sunday's anti-Ukrainian march - and rebel troops protected the captured soldiers from angry citizens - the Times led its Ukraine coverage on Monday with the humiliation of the POWs. The [article](#) by Andrew E. Kramer and Andrew Higgins made a point of contrasting the ugly scene in Donetsk with more orderly celebrations of Ukrainian independence elsewhere. The story began:

“On a day when Ukrainians celebrated their independence from the Soviet Union with parades and speeches, pro-Russia separatists in the eastern part of the country staged a grim counter-spectacle: a parade that mocked the national army and celebrated the deaths and imprisonment of its soldiers.

“Leading the procession was an attractive young blond woman carrying an assault rifle, followed by several dozen captured Ukrainian soldiers, filthy, bruised and unkempt, their heads shaved, wearing fetid camouflage uniforms and looking down at their feet.

“Onlookers shouted that the men should be shot, and pelted the prisoners with empty beer bottles, eggs and tomatoes as they stumbled down Artyomovsk Street, Donetsk’s main thoroughfare. ... People in the crowd shouted ‘fascists!’ and ‘perverts!’ and separatist fighters held back a man who tried to punch a prisoner.”

The Times then noted: “The Geneva Conventions’ rules for treating prisoners of war prohibit parading them in public, but the treatment of the wounded, disheveled prisoners seemed to offend few of those watching, who in any case had turned out for the promise of seeing a ghoulissh spectacle. ‘Shoot them!’ one woman yelled.”

Kiev’s Abuses

While it’s certainly true that POWs shouldn’t be mistreated, it should be at least equally newsworthy when civilians, including children, are being killed by indiscriminate artillery fire directed into cities – or when right-wing storm troopers under Nazi banners are attacking and occupying eastern Ukrainian cities and towns. But the Times’ bias in favor of the Kiev regime has been most obvious in the newspaper’s selective outrage.

At the start of the crisis last winter, the Times sided with the “pro-democracy” demonstrators in Kiev’s Maidan square as they sought to topple democratically elected President Viktor Yanukovich, who had rebuffed an association agreement with the European Union that included harsh austerity measures prescribed by the International Monetary Fund. Yanukovich opted for a more generous offer from Russia of a \$15 billion loan.

Along with the entire U.S. mainstream media, the Times cheered on the violent overthrow of Yanukovich on Feb. 22 and downplayed the crucial role of well-organized neo-Nazi militias that surged to the front of the Maidan protests in the final violent days. Then, with Yanukovich out and a new coup regime in, led by U.S. hand-picked Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk, the IMF austerity plan was [promptly approved](#).

Since then, the Times has behaved as essentially a propaganda organ for the new regime in Kiev and for the State Department, pushing “themes” blaming Russian President Vladimir Putin for the crisis. [For details, see Consortiumnews.com’s “[Ukraine, Though the US ‘Looking Glass.’](#)”]

Some of the most egregious New York Times reporting has been its slanted and erroneous summations of the Ukraine narrative. For instance, immediately after the violent coup (from Feb. 20-22), it was reported that among the 80 people killed were more than a dozen police officers. But, as the Times’ pro-coup sympathies hardened, the storyline changed to: “More than 80 protesters were shot to death by the police as an uprising spiraled out of control in mid-February.” [NYT, March 5]

Both the dead police and the murky circumstances surrounding the sniper fire that inflicted many of the casualties simply disappeared from the Times’ narrative. It became flat fact: evil “pro-Yanukovich” police gunned down innocent “pro-democracy” demonstrators.

Whose Life Matters

Just as the deaths of those early demonstrators were played up by the Times – and even spun to create a more black-and-white narrative – the more recent deaths of thousands of ethnic Russians have been played down. And, the anger of eastern Ukrainians over the brutal assaults on their cities – as displayed in Sunday’s Donetsk demonstration – is then used by the Times to, in effect, justify Kiev’s continued “anti-terrorist” operation. In other words, it seems that the Times places a greater value on the lives of the Maidan demonstrators in Kiev than the ethnic Russians in the east.

The Times also displayed this bias after dozens of ethnic Russian protesters were killed by arson and other violence in Ukraine’s southern port city of Odessa on May 2. The victims had taken refuge in a trade union building after a clash with a pro-Kiev mob.

Even the neocon-dominated Washington Post led its editions with the story of “Dozens killed in Ukraine fighting” and described the fatal incident this way: “Friday evening, a pro-Ukrainian mob attacked a camp where the pro-Russian supporters had pitched tents, forcing them to flee to a nearby government building, a witness said. The mob then threw gasoline bombs into the building. Police said 31 people were killed when they choked on smoke or jumped out of windows. [The death toll later grew.]

“Asked who had thrown the Molotov cocktails, pro-Ukrainian activist Diana Berg said, ‘Our people – but now they are helping them [the survivors] escape the building.’” [In actuality, some of the survivors who jumped from windows were beaten by the pro-Kiev mob.]

By contrast, here is how the New York Times reported the event as part of a story by C.J. Chivers and Noah Sneider which focused on the successes of the pro-coup armed forces in overrunning some eastern Ukrainian rebel positions.

“Violence also erupted Friday in the previously calmer port city of Odessa, on the Black Sea, where dozens of people died in a fire related to clashes that broke out between protesters holding a march for Ukrainian unity and pro-Russian activists. The fighting itself left four dead and 12 wounded, Ukraine’s Interior Ministry said. Ukrainian and Russian news media showed images of buildings and debris burning, fire bombs being thrown and men armed with pistols.”

Note how the Times evades placing any responsibility on the pro-coup mob for trying to burn alive the “pro-Russian activists” who had sought refuge in the building. From reading the Times, you wouldn’t know who had died and who had set the fire.

Embarrassing Lapses

In the Times’ haste to perform its propaganda function, there also have been some notable journalistic embarrassments 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 popular resistance to the coup regime 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.

There's also the issue of U.S. selectivity in defending the principle of not parading or otherwise humiliating POWs. That issue arose last decade during the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq when the U.S. news media showed little outrage over the treatment of "war on terror" captives who were displayed in humiliating postures at the U.S. prison camp at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, or when Iraqi soldiers were paraded before U.S. cameras to demonstrate American military success in Iraq.

By contrast, there was a firestorm during the early days of the U.S. invasion of Iraq when five U.S. POWs were questioned by Iraqi television reporters in the southern Iraqi city of Nasiriya.

U.S. officials immediately denounced the brief televised interviews with the prisoners as a violation of the Geneva Conventions, a charge that was repeated over and over by U.S. television networks. "It's illegal to do things to POWs that are humiliating to those prisoners," declared Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

Yet, the mainstream U.S. media stayed silent about the obvious inconsistency between its outrage over the footage of the American soldiers and the U.S. media's decision only a few days earlier to run repeated clips of Iraqis identified as prisoners of war.

In that case, Iraqi POWs were paraded before U.S. cameras as "proof" that Iraqi resistance was crumbling. Some of the scenes showed Iraqi POWs forced at gunpoint to kneel down with their hands behind their heads as they were patted down by U.S. soldiers. Yet neither U.S. officials nor U.S. reporters covering the war for the major news networks observed how those scenes might be a violation of international law.

Nor did the U.S. media see fit to remind viewers how President George W. Bush had stripped prisoners of war captured in Afghanistan of their rights under the Geneva Conventions. Bush ordered hundreds of captives from Afghanistan to be put in tiny outdoor cages at Camp X-Ray in Guantanamo Bay.

The prisoners were shaved bald and forced to kneel down with their eyes, ears and mouths covered to deprive them of their senses. The shackled prisoners were filmed being carried on stretchers to interrogation sessions. Their humiliation was broadcast for all the world to see but the treatment was accepted by the U.S. press as just fine. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[International Law a la Carte.](#)"]

That selective outrage was on display again on Monday in the New York Times.

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