

War Propaganda: Another New York Times ‘Sort of’ Retraction on Ukraine

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The mainstream U.S. media likes to talk about Ukraine as an “information war,” meaning that the Russians are making stuff up. But the false narratives are actually being hatched more on the U.S. side, as a new New York Times story acknowledges, writes.

The New York Times, which has asserted for weeks that the Russian government is behind the unrest in Ukraine’s east, finally sent some reporters to the region to dig up the proof, but all they found were eastern Ukrainians upset by the coup regime in Kiev that replaced President Viktor Yanukovich.

The Times, which has been an unapologetic promoter of the “pro-democracy” uprising that ousted the democratically elected president through violent extra-constitutional means, has recently been promoting the “theme” that Ukrainians would be happy with their new unelected government if only the Russians weren’t “destabilizing eastern Ukraine.”

Times’ editors thought they had the goods two weeks ago with a front-page [scoop](#) featuring photographs supposedly proving the presence of Russian special forces troops. According to the Times, the photos “clearly” showed Russian special forces in Russia and then the same soldiers in eastern Ukraine.

However, only two days later, the scoop [unraveled](#) 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.

So, the Times belatedly dispatched reporters C.J. Chivers and Noah Sneider to Slovyansk in eastern Ukraine to talk with the militants who are opposing the coup regime in Kiev. To their credit, the two reporters actually seem to have [recounted](#) what they found, albeit with some of the anti-Russian bias that is now deeply embedded in the Western media narrative.

Noting that Moscow says the Ukrainian militants are not part of the Russian armed forces while “Western officials and the Ukrainian government insist that Russians have led, organized and equipped the fighters,” the reporters write:

“A deeper look at the 12th Company [of the People’s Militia] — during more than a week of visiting its checkpoints, interviewing its fighters and observing them in action against a Ukrainian military advance here on Friday — shows that in its case neither portrayal captures the full story.

“The rebels of the 12th Company appear to be Ukrainians but, like many in the region, have

deep ties to and affinity for Russia. They are veterans of the Soviet, Ukrainian or Russian Armies, and some have families on the other side of the border. There is a tangled mix of identities and loyalties.

“Further complicating the picture, while the fighters share a passionate distrust of Ukraine’s government and the Western powers that support it, they disagree among themselves about their ultimate goals. They argue about whether Ukraine should redistribute power via greater federalization or whether the region should be annexed by Russia, and they harbor different views about which side might claim Kiev, the capital, and even about where the border of a divided Ukraine might lie.”

Chuckling at Kiev

The Times reporters cited one unit leader named Yuri as chuckling “at the claims by officials in Kiev and the West that his operations had been guided by Russian military intelligence officers. There is no Russian master, he said. ‘We have no Muscovites here,’ he said. ‘I have experience enough.’ That experience, he and his fighters say, includes four years as a Soviet small-unit commander in Kandahar, Afghanistan, in the 1980s.

“The 119 fighters he said he leads, who appear to range in age from their 20s to their 50s, all speak of prior service in Soviet or Ukrainian infantry, airborne, special forces or air-defense units.”

The reporters also discovered mostly well-worn and dated weaponry, not the newer and more sophisticated equipment that is available to Russian forces.

“During the fighting on Friday, two of the fighters carried hunting shotguns, and the heaviest visible weapon was a sole rocket-propelled grenade,” Chivers and Sneider wrote. “Much of their stock was identical to the weapons seen in the hands of Ukrainian soldiers and Interior Ministry special forces troops at government positions outside the city. These included 9-millimeter Makarov pistols, Kalashnikov assault rifles and a few Dragunov sniper rifles, RPK light machine guns and portable antitank rockets, including some with production stamps from the 1980s and early 1990s.”

Other Western journalists, who have bothered to report from eastern Ukraine rather than just accept handouts from the U.S. Embassy in Kiev or the State Department in Washington, discovered a similar reality.

For instance, on April 17, Washington Post correspondent Anthony Faiola [reported](#) from Donetsk that many of the eastern Ukrainians whom he interviewed said the unrest in their region was driven by fear over “economic hardship” and the IMF austerity plan that will make their lives even harder.

“At a most dangerous and delicate time, just as it battles Moscow for hearts and minds across the east, the pro-Western government is set to initiate a shock therapy of economic measures to meet the demands of an emergency bailout from the International Monetary Fund,” Faiola reported.

But this on-the-ground reality of legitimate and understandable concerns among the eastern Ukrainians has been missing from the U.S. propaganda barrage, which has overwhelmed the mainstream press as thoroughly as a similar P.R. campaign did during the run-up to the Iraq

War, if not more so. Official Washington's "group think" now is all about blaming Russian President Vladimir Putin for the Ukraine crisis.

One of the more preposterous theories that I have heard from Washington punditry and officialdom is that Putin arranged the Ukraine chaos as part of a scheme to reclaim land lost after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Though this notion of Putin as the aggressor plotting to reassert Russian imperialism has become something of a "conventional wisdom," it is fully unsupported by the facts.

To believe that Putin instigated the Ukraine crisis, you would have to believe that he organized the Maidan protests, that he built up the neo-Nazi militias that spearheaded the Feb. 22 coup, and that he intentionally overthrew his ally, Yanukovich, whom Putin seemed to be trying to save. Though this conspiracy theory is ludicrous, it is now widespread in Official Washington.

Caught Off-Guard

The reality was that Putin was caught off-guard by the events in Ukraine, in part, because he was preoccupied with the Sochi Winter Olympics and the threat that the games would be marred by a major terrorist attack. He spent a great deal of time in Sochi personally overseeing the security.

Meanwhile, the Maidan uprising was unfolding in Kiev, cheered on by U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland and partly financed by American entities, such as the U.S.-funded National Endowment for Democracy, whose longtime president Carl Gershman [deemed](#) Ukraine "the biggest prize" in a Washington Post op-ed published in late September, months before the current crisis erupted.

Though many of the protesters from western Ukraine had legitimate grievances over the pervasive corruption in Ukrainian politics and the inordinate power of a handful of wealthy oligarchs, the final violent coup was carried out by well-trained neo-Nazi militias organized in 100-man brigades, known as "the hundreds."

After the Feb. 22 putsch when Yanukovich and many of his officials were forced to flee for their lives, Putin began reacting to this deteriorating situation on Russia's border. What he was doing was "crisis management," not implementing some Machiavellian scheme that had long been contemplated.

But the demonization of Putin in the Western media has been so total that anyone who dares question the most extreme interpretations of his behavior is denounced as a "Putin apologist." Indeed, any attempt to present a nuanced narrative of what has happened in Ukraine is dismissed as somehow promoting Russian imperialism or spreading Russian propaganda.

This oppressive "group think" has, in turn, made formulating any rational policy toward Russia and Ukraine politically impossible in Official Washington.

In this context of asking who's the real propagandist, it's worth looking back on another New York Times front-page [story](#) from mid-April by David M. Herszenhorn, who accused the Russian government of engaging in a propaganda war.

In the article entitled "Russia Is Quick To Bend Truth About Ukraine," Herszenhorn mocked

Russian Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev for making a Facebook posting that “was bleak and full of dread,” including noting that “blood has been spilled in Ukraine again” and adding that “the threat of civil war looms.”

The Times article continued, “He [Medvedev] pleaded with Ukrainians to decide their own future ‘without usurpers, nationalists and bandits, without tanks or armored vehicles – and without secret visits by the C.I.A. director.’ And so began another day of bluster and hyperbole, of the misinformation, exaggerations, conspiracy theories, overheated rhetoric and, occasionally, outright lies about the political crisis in Ukraine that have emanated from the highest echelons of the Kremlin and reverberated on state-controlled Russian television, hour after hour, day after day, week after week.”

This argumentative “news” story spilled from the front page to the top half of an inside page, but Herszenhorn never managed to mention that there was nothing false in what Medvedev wrote. Indeed, as the bloodshed has grown worse and a civil war has become more apparent, you might say Medvedev was tragically prescient.

It was also the much-maligned Russian press that first reported the secret visit of CIA Director John Brennan to Kiev. Though the White House later [confirmed](#) that report, Herszenhorn cited Medvedev’s reference to it in the context of “misinformation” and “conspiracy theories.” Nowhere in the long article did the Times inform its readers that, yes, the CIA director did make a secret visit to Ukraine.

Perhaps, the Chivers-Sneider story about the backgrounds of the fighters in the People’s Militia of eastern Ukraine – what looks like another New York Times’ “sort of” retraction of its earlier claims – will give some pause to the U.S. propaganda stampede into another unnecessary war. [For more details, see Consortiumnews.com’s “[Ukraine, Though the US ‘Looking Glass.’](#)”]

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