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Into the Irrational Core of Pure Violence

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Kremlin's War in Ukraine

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At the same time as Russian forces began blasting munitions at the Babi Yar memorial, the ravine in Kyiv where Nazi troops massacred over 33,000 Jews, the country announced that it would be holding an “anti-fascist” congress. Inviting other nations with which Russia hopes to partner, such as China, India, and Saudi Arabia, Russia’s President Vladimir Putin seeks to frame Ukraine as controlled by the far-right, thus making it a pariah. By arguing that Russia is “de-Nazifying” Ukraine, Putin positions that country for regime change—an act that he presents as progressive benevolence. Through an appeal to antifascism, the Russian leadership plays on the history of the Soviets defeating the Nazis on the Eastern Front during World War II, while distorting an already-confused and often-frightened public conversation about the role of the far-right in instigating global conflict.

On February 26, the *New Fascism Syllabus* published co-director of the department “Communism and Society” at the Leibnitz Cen-

ter for Contemporary History at the University of Potsdam, Juliane Fürst's "On Ukraine, Putin, and the Realities and Rhetoric of War," which makes important contributions to the study of the rhetoric of "fascism" in use today by Russia's President Vladimir Putin. Reflecting on her experiences growing up in Germany, Fürst describes feeling some relief that the Soviet Union replaced the association between Germans and Nazism with the broader category of "fascism," but explains that "the category was elastic and inclusive, in the bad sense of the term." Bad, particularly, for western Ukrainians, whose repudiation of Soviet oppression left them open to a nationalist "response to an official Soviet narrative (created by Stalin and intensified by Brezhnev) that left no room for nuances and personal recollections running counter to the story of Soviet liberation from fascism and Nazi occupation."

Such anti-Soviet nationalism became a kind of counter-culture, not only in Ukraine but among bohemians throughout the Soviet republics. In Moscow, an esoteric, Traditionalist group with a penchant for Nazi symbolism called the Yuzhinsky circle gathered for celebrations of fascism. While some of the Yuzhinsky circle's ultranationalist commitments were genuine, a ludic obscurantism also prevailed. As Fürst notes, "fascism had been degraded to a cypher for some vague notion of provocativeness, blending out its dark features and grim history," and yet by this turn, antifascism too has become subject to degradation, a question of enemy pollution and infection rather than the repudiation of a specific ideology. Thus, through "de-Nazification," Putin deploys the connotations of Stalinist de-Nazification—a campaign to purge all those contaminated—in Fürst's words, to change "not only the Ukrainians' physical reality of living in their own state, but their very notion as a people separate from Putin's vision of Russians."

Putin's de-Nazification then stands for de-Ukrainization. For Putin, Ukraine has no history, but "modern Ukraine was entirely created... by Bolshevik, Communist Russia... in a way that was extremely harsh on Russia—by separating, severing what is

and concomitant shelling of civilian targets. Without recourse to reason, Russia must resort to raw coercion, power politics, to exert its sovereignty, all while presenting its alternative to the unipolarity of the U.S. empire as the de facto liberatory choice. By offering itself as an enemy of the U.S., it hopes to court a new class of friends. Russian nationalism acts as part of the vanguard of far-right movements, helping to re-align geopolitics away from cooperation and toward a binary, illiberal opposition. And this reality offers little to those who would be swayed by appeals to antifascism. By inviting paradox, Putin and Dugin both hope to curry favor with those confused about the actual role of the far-right and to pull critics of America, Ukraine, and the European Union into either a supportive or neutral position towards Russia's assault. For that reason, the struggle against imperialism in Ukraine cannot be fought only there but must be universalized on the level of a struggle for freedom and equality everywhere.

To understand this, the analytical framework called "Three Way Fight", important to antifascism, can be helpful: Russia is not the friend of those who seek to reform Western powers, despite acting as a challenge to Western countries. Instead, the insurgent role of the far right has the ability to link together various ideological constituencies into a dangerous confederation that is capable of more than just this conflict. The historic role of antifascism has been to defend against insurgent far-right movements that want to undermine democratic values by appeals to essentialized identity and authoritarian controls. But antifascism is not a politics nor an ideology so much as it is an ethos, a moral imperative that serves as the backbone for the post-War world that Putin wants to destroy. In this regard, debate may continue about whether or not Putin, himself, has made a "fascist turn" toward totalitarian control and neo-Eurasian expansion, but his claims to antifascism remain indisputably specious.

historically Russian land." In his torturous, hour-long February 21 speech, Putin describes Ukraine as, "an inalienable part of [Russia's] history, culture and spiritual space... relatives, people bound by blood, by family ties." Putin's appeal to emotional terms like "extremely harsh," and his claim that Donbas "was actually shoved into Ukraine," compose the backdrop of a historical fiction that ultimately enables Putin to insist that the Soviet Union's delegation of powers to its quasi-autonomous republics led to its ultimate disintegration.

On Ukrainian independence, Putin belligerently insists, "You want decommunization? Very well, this suits us just fine. But why stop halfway? We are ready to show what real decommunizations would mean for Ukraine." So, obviously, decommunization involves the termination of the legacy of autonomy, however tenuous, bestowed on Ukraine, and its ultimate reassimilation into the Russian imperial space, which he deems in his February 24 speech, their "historical homeland."

One person who understood immediately the implications of the term "decommunization" was one of the foremost mavens of the fascistized Soviet counter-culture, Aleksandr Dugin, a former member of the Yuzhinsky circle. "The President spoke about decommunization," Dugin responded. "I think he meant only that Russia is more than one century old and that we are the bearers of a new ideology—not liberal, obviously, but not communist either. We are the people of the Empire. We Russians are not about the past, we are about the future."

And Dugin's early writings on Ukraine fall very close to Putin's recent claims. "Ukraine as a state has no geopolitical meaning," wrote Dugin in his 1997 diatribe, *The Foundation of Geopolitics*. "It has no particular cultural import or universal significance, no geographic uniqueness, no ethnic exclusiveness." Of course, acting on the denial of Ukraine's right to exist under historical, philosophical, cultural, or other pretexts is, itself, a genocidal practice. For Dugin, only three western Ukrainian regions—Volynia, Gali-

cia, and Trans-Carpathia assembled into one Western Ukrainian Federation—might be peeled off from Greater Russia, but with the caveat that it remains a non-NATO entity.

Yet despite these similarities, for Dugin, Putin’s usage of “de-Nazification,” and especially antifascism, seems particularly awkward. One of Dugin’s most crucial influences, fascist geopolitician Jean-François Thiriart, supported Ukrainian ultranationalist Stepan Bandera in seeking to push the borders of the Soviet Union back to the boundary that existed prior to the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (i.e., something like Dugin’s division between Greater Russia and a hypothetical Western Ukrainian Federation). Another of Dugin’s formative influences, Belgian Rexist Leon Degrelle, wrote an entire book lionizing his own experiences fighting the Soviets in Ukraine with the murderous Waffen SS—an undertaking collaborated with Bandera’s forces.

Neither Dugin nor the Kremlin demur from using the label of “Nazism” or “fascism” to pillory liberal opponents in prescriptive fashion. FSB head Sergey Naryshkin recently blasted sanctions visited on Russia by the West, insisting that they represent a manifestation of a “‘tolerant’ liberal-fascist environment.” The notion of sanctions as part of “cancel culture” within “liberal-fascism” deployed by Naryshkin points to former Fox News personality Jonah Goldberg, whose thesis that fascism’s roots lie in liberal ideology has been roundly rejected by experts on the subject. At the same time, it is difficult to imagine Dugin, far more immersed in the real fascist tradition than Goldberg, making such a definitional error.

Stating that Ukrainians have been swayed by “terrible Nazi-liberal propaganda” coming from the U.S., Dugin’s position posted on March 4 to Facebook can be both compared and contrasted to Naryshkin. Dugin identifies the Ukrainian liberal movement, which helped oust Moscow-friendly strongman Viktor Yanukovich in the Orange Revolution of 2004–5 and the Maidan protests of 2013–4, as a composite of liberalism and Nazism. Here, Dugin once again comes close to the Kremlin’s pitch on conquering Ukraine

In the U.S., Nick Fuentes, a white nationalist who has been building relationships with Republican lawmakers through his American First Political Action Conference, hailed Putin as a leader in recentering his brand of politics. “Can we get a round of applause for Russia?” asked Fuentes at the February 25th AFPAC conference, which was followed by chants of “Putin! Putin!”

While it may seem like only the fascist fringe is hailing Russia’s attack on Ukraine in the U.S., AFPAC’s influence extends to our own Congress. Congresswoman Wendy Rogers, herself an attendee at AFPAC and a member of the far-right militia organization the Oath Keepers, said of the Jewish Ukrainian President, “Zelensky is a globalist puppet for Soros and the Clintons,” echoing an antisemitic conspiracy narrative that positions Russia as an authentic representation of the people and Ukraine as an artificial state controlled by plutocrats. Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Green also spoke at AFPAC amidst the celebratory, pro-Russian chants.

Given the reality of the convergence points between Dugin’s neo-Eurasianism and the Kremlin’s ideological imposition over Ukraine, along with the allies it is building, what does it mean to employ the rhetoric of antifascism? Just as has become common in U.S. media discourse, the term becomes distorted, either as a boogeyman or as a sign of political virtue. In reality, Russian fascism has always been fraught, filled with Monarchists, Orthodox theocrats, and crankish geopoliticians. Rather than a coherent whole, the country invaded by the Nazis in 1941 has developed a feverish ultranationalist syncretism that looks, talks, and walks like fascism, but views itself as a higher form of supremacy—what right-wing Traditionalist guru Julius Evola called “super-fascism,” or perhaps better described by scholar Umberto Eco as “ur-fascism.”

Here, we have the irrational core of pure violence: the anti-European Europe, the anti-imperialist empire, the antifascist fascism, the anti-nationalist ultranationalism, and the defense against genocide through the obliteration of a nation’s existence

God-destroying, modernist tendencies—a feat predicated on pure fantasy that would no doubt take no small degree of brutality to realize.

While Putin appears to have vacillated in the past between coopting neo-Eurasianist musings and a more conventional Russian chauvinism, the severing of Russia's financial relationships with the West resulting from the invasion has brought Russia further from Europe, as the hulking country leans on its remaining regional partners in India and China to limp through its economic collapse. From this position, Russia can only increase its opposition to the West in what Dugin views as his spiritual mission—an intrinsically-Conservative, Eurasian war against the “Atlanticists” that will obliterate modernity. In Dugin's nonsensical world, this means turning back and destroying the West from the position of “the real West” (ie, Eurasia): “the sooner and more completely Russia is cut off from [the West], the sooner it will return to its own roots... That is, to roots common with the real West... And Europe needs to break with the West, and even the US needs to follow those who reject globalism.” Destroying the West to rescue it from itself—an all too familiar exercise in impotence.

Despite its militant and total rejection of the modern West, and despite efforts from the far right to use Putin's deceptive claims of antifascism to besmirch antifascism, itself, Russia's role as a “beacon of hope” in shifting of ultranationalist politics onto the world stage, has long been recognized by the Western far-right. One of the most avid supporters of Putin's war in Ukraine, the Russian Imperial Movement, runs a paramilitary camp that trains members of the European far right, and fascist terrorists from the U.S. seek refuge in the country's right-wing political life. Politicians from Marine Le Pen to Mateo Salvini have embraced Putin's eurosceptic model of radical-right politics, playing along with his efforts at global domination. And Dugin's international comrades are, in turn, embraced by Iranian theocrats for his illiberal position.

for the purposes of smiting nationalist sentiment supporting a pro-Western (and thus liberal) position.

As Ukrainian leftist Taras Bilous pointed out, however, nationalist sentiment can run high in Ukraine, but so does ideological complexity involving inter-generational family disputes, socio-economic conflict, and the political geography of the country. The far right has failed to attain significant political power in Ukraine, although it has a presence within the armed forces, as is the case with seemingly every military in the world. Given these complex, multi-scalar fissures, Dugin's position remains perhaps even less untenable than Naryshkin's.

The existence of multiple political positions does not indicate a seamless, heteroclitic mixture of them unless the country is ruled through a syncretic ideology oriented toward the Leader principle, which is precisely Dugin's totalitarian framework for understanding the world. Aside from exaggerating the political role of fascism in Ukraine, the claim that Ukraine is a Nazi-liberal country would be analogous to the notion that the United Kingdom is a “Patriotic Alternative-Labour country” rather than a multi-party democracy. While Naryshkin's perspective on liberal-fascism appeals to the sensibilities of U.S. far right, Dugin's understanding of “Nazi-liberalism” is limited by the bounds of his own simplified worldview. Unfortunately he seems to share this trait with the Kremlin.

On a practical level, the hypocrisy of the supposed “de-Nazification” of Ukraine can be found in the fact that the invasion has been, since 2014, the project of fascists, Orthodox ultranationalists, and Dugin's own network of self-described “neo-Eurasianists.” From the start, the aggression against Ukraine was bankrolled by Dugin's patron, Russia's “Orthodox Oligarch,” Konstantin Malofeev. During the first years, on-the-ground efforts were led by Malofeev's associates Alexander Borodai and Igor Girkin, an ultranationalist who participated in the Bosnian Genocide before becoming Malofeev's security chief. Girkin and Dugin are listed together as among Russia's “authentic high-principled Hitlerites,

true Aryans” in a mordant article by Russian dissident Andrey Piontkovsky.

An influential figure amongst the alt-right and Europe’s fascist “identitarian” movement. Dugin’s ideology is somewhat more syncretic and convoluted than traditional Nazism: he believes in the total destruction of the modern world and the liberalism he feels it represents. This radical upheaval of the world would be followed by the rebirth of patriarchal blood-and-soil communities distinguished by a caste system ruled by warrior-priests, which he calls “political soldiers.” Dugin desires to see Moscow presiding over a Eurasian empire stretching from Dublin to Vladivostok in which Istanbul will return to Constantinople (or “Tsargrad”). For Dugin, the invasion of Ukraine represents merely the first step in this “Great Slavic Reconquista.”

Of course, the “Reconquest of Constantinople” would merely serve as the crown jewel in Dugin’s broader geographic aims. Countries invited to the August anti-fascist congress include India, currently led by far-right strongman Narendra Modi, whose Hindu nationalism stems from Hitler admirers like Vayak Savarkar, who advocated a “final solution” for India’s Muslims. Russia has also purportedly invited the increasingly-nationalist regime in China to participate, despite its genocide of the majority-Muslim Uyghur population in Xinjiang.

For Dugin, these two countries, along with Russia and Iran, make up “the powers of the Eurasian continent.” A Senior Fellow at the China Institute in Fudan University in Shanghai, Dugin believes that China follows a “National Communist” line akin to National Bolshevism, which he calls “Leftist anti-Hitler National Socialism” and combines with neo-Eurasianism as “secondary variations” of his own “Fourth Political Theory.” So while Modi’s Hindutva unquestionably draws on an ultranationalist position sympathetic to Hitler, Dugin believes that China abides by a companion ideology to a strain of Nazism, which itself is integral to his own Traditionalism. Quite the antifascist congress!

In a generic sense, Dugin’s neo-Eurasianist ideology fits the model for what fascism scholar Roger Griffin calls “palingenetic ultranationalism,” which calls for an almost spiritual and violent revival of a mythic nation. Dugin shares Putin’s Russian chauvinism and desire for a “Greater Russia” under a new empire, through which he claims to have overcome the oppositions between fascism and communism. So, when appearing as a guest on Infowars, for instance, Dugin paradoxically claims in some ways to be “antifascist,” but in other contexts, such as his Fourth Political Theory, promotes his own ideology as a kind of essential “common root” for fascism and communism (i.e., a more supreme version of National Socialism).

The manipulation of antifascism into the rejection of “Nazi-liberalism” manifests a cynical tactic to turn the tables. We see this tactic utilized elsewhere, such as claims to be defending Russian-speaking Ukrainians from “genocide” by the likes of Dugin’s close comrade, Sergei Glazyev, who was dismissed by Putin from the role of advisor on Eurasian Integration after averring that Israel sought to replace Russians with Jews in Ukraine. Thus, Russia’s Ukraine revanchism takes on a form of “Great Replacement theory” whereby a supposed Deep State plot to replace ethnic nationals with foreign cosmopolitans becomes an excuse to deport, further marginalize, or simply exterminate massive numbers of ethnic, racial, and religious minorities, depending on the level of extremism.

In a similar rhetorical inversion, Dugin attempts to pull at the fringes of the left by using the impetus of “anti-imperialism” to summon a “Traditionalist International” in opposition to “globalism,” which he views as intrinsic to the West’s “thalassocracy,” despite championing a return to the age of empire. Dugin recently claimed that Russia would bear the standard for a Europe delinked from the supposed liberalism of “Rothschild, Soros, Schwab, Bill Gates, and Zuckerberg.” Anchored in Moscow’s empire, sea-faring partnerships and powers would be brought to heel, along with their