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An antifascist nation

The dramatic change of narrative in the
Russian-Ukrainian war

Dmitry Mrachnik

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The undeclared war against Ukraine has been ongoing for the past eight years. During this time, Kremlin propagandists have been relentlessly forging an extensive narrative: Russia, being an international peacekeeper and the “progenitor of communism”, is fighting Ukrainian “Nazism,” and considers the Ukrainian revolution of 2014 to be a fascist coup resulting in a Nazi junta. Ukrainian volunteers in Donbas are **Banderites** (followers of Stepan Bandera, a Ukrainian nationalist movement leader in the 1940s), while Volodymyr Zelensky (being Jewish) is just a toy in the hands of radical nationalists. Thus, according to Vladimir Putin, the only reason for Ukraine’s constant and fierce resistance to the full Russian military invasion of 2022 are provocations conducted by Neo-Nazis.

The new round of the devastating war over the last month exposed how blunt and corrupted the Russian regime is: they had not worked off actual intelligence regarding Ukrainian moods and capabilities, but relied on Russian state TV propaganda. As a result, the Russian army started their offensive without adequate prepa-

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ration, supply, and even realistic operational objectives. This fish rots from the head down, and said head believed that the Ukrainian army would not resist, and that Ukrainian citizens will give Russian soldiers a warm welcome. Well, the Ukrainians did indeed welcome them with palyanytsya (a traditional Ukrainian bread and symbol of hospitality), but in a completely different way. Russians can't really pronounce this Ukrainian word correctly, so it became a quick and precise background check when identifying subversive Russian reconnaissance groups, and a popular joke and meme.

Nevertheless, this vast narrative was wrecked, much like a ship led by a self-aggrandizing and incapable captain. His crew was reluctant to deliver bad news to him, and didn't report on the oncoming blizzard and the rocks in the distance. And just like that, the Russian assault on February 24 turned out to be an impudent and powerless action. Putin failed to persuade the global community that democratic and thriving under the toughest conditions Ukraine is actually miserable and unworthy of international support.

Russian state media relied on trumpeting the narrative of fascists among the Ukrainian military and volunteer units, but managed to convince only a marginal section of Western leftists. Such arguments as a "coup d'etat" in Ukraine, or the "Kyiv Nazi junta" had been completely disavowed during the past eight years of war. Moreover, thousands of Europeans and Americans had visited Ukraine and made up their mind according to their own experience — and their conclusions did not line up with the Kremlin's line

The fact that Ukraine is far from fascism can be easily substantiated by our public life, inter alia, free elections, rotation in power, freedom to protest, etc. A mass of research in recent years has revealed that Ukrainians disapprove of hate crimes, even against marginalized groups. Furthermore, prevalent attitudes regarding social and economic issues tend toward the left side of the political spectrum.

Right-wing radical parties are not represented in the Ukrainian Parliament, as they fail the electoral threshold, while the popular liberal party Holos, or voice, leads its own parliamentary faction and is remarkably vociferous about implementing relatively left-wing policy. The ruling Servant of the People party has many specific post-Soviet shortcomings, but it seems cautious during decision-making, and responsive to public feedback. Certainly, there are solid grounds for criticism, but obviously, it will not move towards authoritarianism, despite holding a mono-majority, and its leader, President Zelensky, is a living testament to that.

Violation of the laws and customs of war, and conduct of war crimes: Russia had invaded Ukraine without any legitimate reason, it is occupying our towns, conducting massed shelling and rocket attacks against residential areas, commencing airstrikes on hospitals and shelters; attacking humanitarian corridors. The Russian military commits robberies, plunders civilian residences, and conducts other violent crimes against civilians and their property, including widespread rape. Russian troops are responsible for the forcible abduction of thousands of Ukrainians to the Russian Federation; as well as for numerous cases of kidnapping and torturing of mayors and councilors in small Ukrainian towns.

Suppression of dissent in the Russian Federation: independent media in Russia have ceased their activities; Russian censorship rules stipulate that the war must be called a “special operation”, it is forbidden to use the word “war” itself; there is a brutal crackdown on any anti-war protests; independent reporting on, and protests against the war, are criminalized with penalties of up to 15 years in prison.

Incitement of anti-Ukrainian hatred: Russian state media and authorities disseminate conspiracy allegations that Kyiv is developing a biological weapon of a selective ethnic anti-Russian nature; they depict the Ukrainians as enemies of humanity, and conversely, accuse NATO of the same. Russian propagandists turned out

to be inspired by the Third Reich: the speech Putin gave on the eve of the offensive is a clear paraphrase of Goebbels' pre-war oration.

The vulgarization of Russian patriotism: Russian "patriotism" is reduced to the letter "Z", this primitive symbol of military aggression. Since the beginning of the invasion, it has evolved from a simple mark for armored vehicles, into a contemporary swastika.

As it follows from these salient facts, notably the worship of this concept of national supremacy, scathing intolerance to any kind of dissent, hate speech in state media, and war crimes, Russia can be safely declared to be a fascist state. We are witnessing one more "killing joke": the ideology of the USSR, for decades, was defined by its opposition to fascism, while Russia had turned into a fascist regime. This is not an ironic remark: any scientific definition of fascism accurately describes what is happening in the Russian state today. The only people resisting fascism in the 21st century are the Ukrainians — both ideologically and practically, armed either with guns or our national flag. We are fighting fascism in terms of the global order, because we are protecting democracy and human rights. We are fighting fascism ideologically, as we stand for peace and mutual respect among peoples. We are fighting fascism in the name of being, since we believe that love defines life, not domination and hate.

Without exaggeration, Ukraine today is an antifascist nation. We are standing on the front lines of a worldwide struggle against totalitarian darkness and rage. Volunteers from all over the world come to Ukraine to help us exterminate the fascist beast. There is no denying that our Azov regiment was put on the map by right-wing rabble-rousers, but it has now shifted its attitudes and taken a stand against fascism conceptually, and practically. There is no chance you can find antifascists like us anywhere else in the whole world. No one has embodied antifascism as Ukraine has. There is no other country that has managed to incarnate antifascism without any ideological bias, aside from the protection of freedom and humanism.

Many of the world's antifascists are merely LARPer. Occasionally, they break into a scuffle with the others like themselves, but from the other party. Few have taken direct action to protect themselves, their values, and their communities like Ukraine has. They hate countries for no reason, they support ones whom they have never met and know vanishingly little about. It's easy, safe, and pleasant to tackle imaginary fascism in Germany or express support for Palestinian militants. However, waging war against actual fascism is perilous (though also delightful at times). Antifascists all over the world should revise their distorted beliefs. Otherwise, they risk missing out on a crucial juncture of history.