Anti-government protests in Kiev, 2014

Author: Sasha Maksymenko; URL: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Anti-government_protests_in_Kiev_(13087644205).jpg

USA - A Cold-War Discourse Tinted with Holocaust Rhetoric: The Ukrainian Crisis in the United States Elite Press

Brian Horowitz

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The situation in Ukraine is the subject of an intense discussion in the public sphere and the media across Europe. But what do we know about how our neighbouring countries are reflecting on the crisis, its historical background and its meaning for the relationship between our countries, Ukraine, Russia and the European Union? During 2014 and 2015 the Cultures of History Forum asked historians and sociologists from more than 15 European countries, the US, Israel and Turkey to reflect on the media coverage and public debates regarding the Ukrainian crisis in their countries. This paper is a short outline of the coverage of the Euromaidan protests by Ukrainian television and the Internet in the period from November 2013 to spring 2014. The present article focuses on the medai coverage of these events in major US intellectual news outlets, the New York Times, New Yorker, and the New York Review of Books.

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USA - A Cold-War Discourse Tinted with Holocaust Rhetoric: The Ukrainian Crisis in the United States Elite Press

The reportage in the United States about the Ukraine crisis in the major elite news outlets - New York Times, New Yorker, and the New York Review of Books - has been surprisingly reminiscent of the Cold War. It seems as though attitudes toward Russia had returned to a preconceived pattern that had been prepared precisely for this contingency. From the first days of the crisis, as the pro-Western Ukrainians in Maidan were shouting for revolution, the editorials in the US attempted to convince the American public that the cause is right because it is anti-Russian.

The Good and The Bad

Few of the articles even attempt to provide an analysis. Most hit the reader over the head with a sledgehammer and portray both sides as moral opposites: good Ukraine and bad Russia, free Ukraine and imprisoned Russia, European Ukraine and despotic Russia. Timothy Snyder's OP-ED in the New York Times from 3 February 2014, gives a powerful impression of this kind of writing.

"Unlike Europe and the United States, Russia has a clear stance on Ukraine. Vladimir Putin's hope for the future is his Eurasian Union, to be established next January as a rival to the European Union. Belarusian and Kazakh strongmen are game to join his dictators' club. But since the idea has little popular support anywhere, Eurasian integration can take place only in conditions of Russian domination and local dictatorship. For Mr. Putin, the Eurasian Union would be meaningless without Ukraine. Eurasian ideology is the brainchild of Alexander Dugin, who has never disguised his admiration of fascism. His website publishes Russian strategists who claim that Ukraine is not a sovereign state."[1]

The Roods of Conflict

In contrast to such strong opinions, the articles by David Remnick in the New Yorker are informed and reasonable; at least they shun any speculation about Russian fascism. They have been characterized by criticism of Putin's government. Remnick argues that lack of democracy and economic weakness inside Russia have forced Putin to view Ukraine as a threat.[2] The last thing Putin needs now is a Western model on his own front step.

There have been some exceptions to the anti-Russian front. The former diplomat Jack Matlock[3] and the academic Stephen F. Cohen[4] have been vocal about the need to understand the Russian position. Both men employ history to show that Crimea has traditionally been viewed as part of Russia. Furthermore, they both see the Russian government as strongly influenced by public opinion, and therefore different from an insular dictatorship. The two men point to the Russian public's nostalgia for the Soviet Union, a time when Russia ruled over a huge and feared empire. However, Matlock and Cohen are not blind to Putin's opportunism. They agree that Putin exploited the Crimean Affair to mask larger economic and political problems that he is unable to solve without making risky changes. Nevertheless, in contrast to Snyder, they do not see the hand of Dugin or a Russian yearning for fascism.

However, Matlock and Cohen have been sharply criticized as Russian stooges. Most recently Cohen came under sharp attack in the New York Times from Sławomir Sierakowski, a young sociologist from

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Warsaw,[5] who claimed that Cohen and other Western writers who don't blanket Putin with criticism are "useful idiots," a term apparently coined by Vladimir Lenin to represent any Western spokesman in favor of Communism. In other words, Russia equals the Soviet Union, Putin equals Lenin, and Cohen and Gerhard Schröder[6] are useful idiots who identify with Russian power and therefore suffer from a Soviet-bloc "Stockholm Syndrome" that is sweetened with Gazprom money.

The accusations thrown around in these articles get dirty and personal. A half way or compromise position does not seem possible. The default position in the US is to defend the powerless Ukrainians against the hungry Russian bear. Yet a few write about Russia objectively. Such are military analysts who are deeply impressed with Putin's execution of his plan to take Crimea militarily or those, like Matlock[7] and Cohen[8]http://www.imre-kertesz-kolleg.uni-jena.de/index.php?id=579&l=1%25%20percent27#_ftn3, who want to illuminate why the Russian government acts as it does and why the Russian public feels as it does.

Perhaps the saddest aspect of the articles in defense of the Ukrainians has been the endless invocation of the Holocaust. The arguments go like this: "Not the Ukrainians, but the Russians are anti-Semitic"; "Yes, there are neo-Nazis among the Ukrainians, but it's only a small minority"; "Yes, there are neo-Nazis among the Ukrainians, but that only shows the vibrancy of Ukrainian democracy." At times it seems that anti-Semite merely means that group you don't like. In an article in the New York Review of Books Timothy Snyder[9] takes a different line. He sees a threat to the entire Holocaust discourse in the West because of its use by the Russians against the Ukrainians. However, he forgets that the "Holocaust" is already tarnished by indiscriminate overuse.

"The history of the Holocaust is part of our own public discourse, our agora, or maidan. The current Russian attempt to manipulate the memory of the Holocaust is so blatant and cynical that those who are so foolish to fall for it will one day have to ask themselves just how, and in the service of what, they have been taken in. If fascists take over the mantle of antifascism, the memory of the Holocaust will itself be altered. It will be more difficult in the future to refer to the Holocaust in the service of any good cause, be it the particular one of Jewish history or the general one of human rights"

In my view few people are duped by the argument that the Ukrainian struggle against Russia is a victory for fascism. Everyone understands that Russia is the aggressor and no doubt Russia bears the lion share of blame for the crisis. That point has been made and it sticks hard. But too little criticism has been aimed at the Ukrainians themselves. In fact, what is really missing from the debate in the US press is a discussion of Ukraine's economic troubles and the reasons for them. Strangely, there is also scarce interest in Ukraine's regional issues, political fragmentation, and cultural division. If Ukraine is going to be able to remain a unified state, these questions about union and division, rather than the Russian-Ukraine fight, will need addressing.

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Footnotes

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8. See for example: Stephen F. Cohen, Flawed U.S. Policy Led to This New Cold War, The Moscow Times (4 April 2014), retrieved 27 February 2016, URL: http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/flawed-us-policy-led-to-this-new-cold-war/497469.html; Katrina vanden Heuvel and Stephen F. Cohen, Cold War Against Russia—Without Debate, The Nation (1 May 2014), retrieved 27 February 2016, URL: http://www.thenation.com/article/cold-war-against-russia-without-debate/.
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