

## Crimea: Putin vs. Reality | Timothy Snyder

Timothy Snyder

This is the third installment in Timothy Snyder's series on Russian ideology and the Ukrainian revolution. Earlier articles examined the Kremlin's [Eurasian ideology](#) and its [propaganda about the Kiev uprising](#).



Yury Kirnichny/AFP/Getty Images

Ukrainian members of parliament watching Russian President Vladimir Putin's press conference, March 4, 2014

The Russian invasion and occupation of Ukraine's Crimean peninsula is a disaster for the European peacetime order. But more critical still is just what Russian President Vladimir Putin thinks he is doing. The clues are there before us, in the language of the Kremlin's non-stop propaganda campaign in the Russian media. The repeatedly recycled categories are the "fascist coup" in Ukraine and the "Russian citizens" who suffer under it. Putin's justification for occupying part of Ukraine, and threatening to invade the entire country, has been to save the Russians there from the fascists.

Let's consider each of these conceits in turn. Did the current Ukrainian authorities come to power in a fascist coup? As everyone who has followed these events [knows](#), the mass protests against the Yanukovych regime that began in November involved millions of people, from all walks of life. After the regime tried and failed to put down the protests by shooting protestors from rooftops on February 20, EU negotiators arranged a deal whereby Yanukovych would cede power to parliament. Rather than signing the corresponding legislation, as he had committed to do, Yanukovych fled to Russia.

Parliament declared that he had abandoned his responsibilities, followed the protocols that applied to such a case, and continued the process of constitutional reform by itself. Presidential elections were called for May, and a new government was formed. The prime minister is a liberal conservative, one of the two deputy prime ministers is Jewish, and the governor of the important eastern province of Dnipropetrovsk is the president of the Congress of Ukrainian Jewish Organizations. Although one can certainly debate the constitutional nuances, this process was not a coup. And it certainly was not fascist. Reducing the powers of the president, calling presidential elections, and restoring the principles of democracy are the opposite of what fascism would demand. Leaders of the Jewish community have [declared](#) their unambiguous support for the new government and their total opposition to the Russian invasion.

Of the eighteen cabinet posts that have been filled in the new government, three are held by members of the far right party, Svoboda. Its leader had less than 2 percent support in a recent [opinion poll](#)—one that was taken after the Russian invasion of Crimea, an event that presumably would help the nationalists. In any event, this is the grain of truth from which, according to the traditional rules of propaganda, Putin's "fascist coup" has been concocted.

The second conceit, that of the oppression of Russian citizens in the Ukraine, lacks even this. Over the last few months one Russian citizen has been killed in Ukraine. He was not threatened by Ukrainian protestors or by the current government. Quite the opposite. He was fighting for the Ukrainian revolution, and was killed by a sniper's bullet.

In any case, since Ukraine does not allow double citizenship, there are few Russian citizens resident in the country. But let's consider those that are: One notable group are the soldiers and sailors at the military base at Sevastopol. Since these are military men on a military base, they hardly need protection. Another major group are those masked Russian special-forces who are now occupying Crimea. A third are the Russians who have been bused across the border to stage pro-Russian demonstrations and beat Ukrainian students in the cities of eastern Ukraine. A final group of Russian citizens are former Ukrainian riot policemen who took part in the suppression of demonstrations. Having been rewarded for their actions with a Russian passport, they can and do travel

to Russia. None of these groups, by any stretch of the imagination, could be plausibly described as a victimized minority requiring protection.

Putin and others blur the category of citizenship by speaking of Russian “compatriots,” a category that has no legal status. By compatriots Putin means people the Russian government claims as Russians—or who, according to the Kremlin, self-identify as Russians—and who therefore need its protection. This sort of argument, the need to protect the Volksgenossen, was used to significant effect by Adolf Hitler in 1938 in enunciating German claims to Austria and then to the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia. Hitler’s substitution of ethnicity for state borders led then to the Munich conference, appeasement, and World War II. Russian historian Andrei Zubov has developed the comparison with Nazi aggression further, [likening Putin’s action to the Anschluss](#), and recalling that the Anschluss led to a war that turned against its authors. The parallel has also been [noted](#) by the chief rabbi of Ukraine.

Even if the protection of *Volksgenossen* were legally justified, it is simply not clear who these people might be. It is true that Ukrainians speak Russian, but that does not make them Russian, any more than my writing in English makes me English. The language issue can be confusing. Ukrainian citizens are usually bilingual, in Ukrainian and Russian. Russians, like the targets of their propaganda, are rarely bilingual. So it has been all too easy to equate the capacity to speak Russian with a Russian identity that is in need of protection from Russia. Some citizens of Ukraine of course do see themselves as Russians—about 17 percent of the population—but this does not mean that they are subject to discrimination or indeed that they identify with the Russian state. Even in Crimea, where the emotional connections to the Ukrainian state are weakest, only [1 percent of the population](#) identifies Russia as its homeland.

In a number of recent protests, Russian-speaking Ukrainians and members of the Russian ethnic minority in eastern Ukraine have made clear they categorically reject any claim that they need Russian protection. One petition from Russian speakers and Russians in Ukraine asks Putin to leave Ukrainian citizens alone to solve their own problems. It has been [signed by 140,000 people](#). This might seem remarkable, since everyone signing it knows that he or she will be in the bad graces of the Russian authorities if Russia completes its invasion. But it makes perfect sense. Russians in Ukraine enjoy basic political rights, whereas Russians in the Russian Federation do not.



Sergii Kharchenko/NurPhoto/Corbis

Unmarked Russian forces surrounding a Ukrainian marine base in Perevalne, Crimea, March 6, 2014

In view of its patent absurdity, why is this propaganda so important to Putin’s regime? Most obviously, propaganda serves the technical purpose of preparing the way for war. An excellent propaganda apparatus, such as the Russian one, can find ways to repeat its message over and over again in slightly different ways and formats. Plenty of people in the West now spread Russian propaganda, sometimes for money, sometimes from ignorance, and sometimes for reasons best known to themselves. Those who repeat the Russian propaganda conceits do not need to convince everyone, only to set the terms of debate. If people in free societies have their discussions framed for them by rulers of unfree societies, then they will not notice the history unfolding around them (a revolution just happened in Europe!) or sense the urgency of formulating policy in a desperate situation (a European country has just invaded another!). Propaganda can serve this technical purpose no matter how absurd it is.

But propaganda has a deeper and more important function. Propaganda, at least in the old Soviet Union, was not an edited version of reality, but rather a crucial part of the endeavor to create a different reality. When we refute propaganda with facts and arguments, and even when we discuss its social function, we are inhabiting a certain mental world; we accept the constraints of observation and reason at the outset and seek to change our situation on the basis of what we think we can see and understand. But this is not the only possible psychic reality. In the Soviet Union, the assumption among many who believed in the promise of communism was that the future was as real if not more real than the present. Soviet propaganda was not a version of the world in which we live but rather a representation of the world to come. When we see Russia’s current propaganda in this way, we understand why its authors are utterly untroubled by what might appear to be factual errors and contradictions.

Take the idea of Jewish Nazis, which must be taken on if the current Kremlin propaganda about the revolution in Kiev is to have any logical basis. The claim is that Nazis made a coup; the observable reality is that some of the people now in power are Jews. And then we evince our skepticism that Jews are Nazis or that a Nazi coup would put Jews at the top of the Ukrainian state apparatus.

But in the ideology of the Soviet Union and its communist allies, the identification of Jews with Nazis was convenient for those who were in power, and so Jewish Nazis became a propaganda reality. In the years before Stalin's death Israel became part of an international plot that was directed by fascists in the capitalist West. After the Six-Day War the Soviets presented Israeli soldiers and citizens as imitators of the Wehrmacht and the SS. This propaganda was followed by the expulsion of Jews from communist Poland. The fact that Jews left Poland for Israel and the US was presented as evidence that they were fascists all along. The regimes found it politically useful for their own future to target Jews, and therefore Jews, so to speak, were made to become Nazis.

Propaganda is thus not a flawed description, but a script for action. If we consider Putin's propaganda in these Soviet terms, we see that the invasion of Crimea was not a reaction to an actual threat, but rather an attempt to activate a threat so that violence would erupt that would change the world. Propaganda is part of the action it is meant to justify. From this standpoint, an invasion from Russia would lead to a Ukrainian nationalist backlash that would make the Russian story about fascists, so to speak, retrospectively true. If Ukraine is unable to hold elections, it looks less like a democracy. Elections are scheduled, but cannot be held in regions occupied by a foreign power. In this way, military action can make propaganda seem true. Even the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe is unable to fulfill an observation mission.

Indeed, in his March 4 press conference, Putin claimed that the Ukrainian state no longer exists as such, and therefore is not protected by treaties or law. This is quite a radical position, recalling the conclusions that Nazi lawyers drew about Poland after the German invasion of that country in 1939. The position of statelessness would seem to authorize any military action whatsoever without legal restrictions, since Ukraine is in this view a lawless zone.

When the parliament of the Russian Federation (in an appropriately old-fashioned Soviet-style unanimous vote) authorized Putin to use military force throughout Ukraine, it defined the war aim as the restoration of "social and political normality." This is effective rhetoric, as it slips in the implication that what is actually happening in the world, the actual politics and society of actual Ukraine, is not normal. It is also a formulation with terrifying implications. How much violence and how many generations would be necessary before Ukraine society was "normalized," that is, until the supposedly artificial and Western idea of democracy was eliminated, and the supposedly invented Ukrainian national identity was forgotten? The costs to Russians and Ukrainians alike would be staggering, almost unbelievable.

We might not see the new reality that the Russian propaganda is preparing the ground for, but it seems likely that Putin, at least at times, is already inhabiting it. German Chancellor Angela Merkel—an East German and a Russian speaker who knows a thing or two about communism—has remarked that Putin was living "in another world." But what if the propaganda, as effective as it has been in dulling the sensibilities of Westerners, fails to bring that world into being?

As Putin sat slouched in his chair at his press conference, shifting between clever one-liners and contradictory constructions, he seemed to be struggling to reconcile tactics and ideology. On the one hand, he has been an extremely good tactician, far more nimble and ruthless than almost anyone with whom he deals. He carried off his plan in Crimea with panache. He broke all the rules in an act of violence that should have opened a space for the true world, the world he wants, the glorious Russian gathering of Russian lands and peoples.

Yet dramatic action did not summon the envisioned new reality to life. Ukraine did not reveal itself to be a Russian land unhappily and temporarily ruled by a few fascists whose coup could be undone. It looks instead like a place where the revolutionary mood has been consolidated by a foreign invasion. As the chief rabbi of Ukraine [put it](#) a few days ago: "There were many differences of opinion throughout the revolution, but today all that is gone." He continued: "We're faced by an outside threat called Russia. It's brought everyone together."

There are now protests against the Russian occupation throughout the country, even in the south and east, where most people watch Russian television and where the economy is closely linked to Russia. Ukrainians who just a few days ago were in conflict with one another over their own revolution are now protesting together under the same flag. There have been violent clashes, as for example in Kharkiv, but these have been caused by [busloads of Russians](#) brought from across the border. It seems unlikely that the beatings of Ukrainian students by Russian "tourists" (as the Ukrainians, with typical humor, call them) will lead Ukrainians to think that they are Russian compatriots.

The unmarked uniforms of the Russian special forces in Crimea tell this story all by themselves. Theirs was supposed to be the rapid gesture that changed the world. But with each day that passes those ski masks and unmarked uniforms look instead like symbols of shame, hesitation, lack of responsibility—indeed denial of reality. In the Crimean sunshine black ops begin to look a little gray. It must have been enjoyable for Putin to run an operation in which his troops could pretend to be from nowhere. But it was oddly childish of him to deny, in his press conference, what everyone knew: that the troops were Russians. It was as though he wanted the tactical play to last as long as possible, to dream just a bit longer. Ukrainian sailors in Crimea [answered him quite sharply](#), in brisk Russian sentences much better formulated than Putin's own.

The [costs](#) of what Russia has done are very real, for Europe, for Ukraine, and for Russia itself. Russian propaganda has elegantly provided a rationale for Russian tactics and articulately defined a Russian dream for Ukraine. But in the end propaganda is all that unites the tactics and the dream, and that unity turns out to be wishful. There is no actual policy, no strategy, just a talented and tortured tyrant oscillating between mental worlds that are connected only by a tissue of lies. Putin faces a choice: use far more violence, in the hope that another surge will finally make the dream come true, or seek an exit in which he can claim some victory—which would be wise but deflating. He appears to feel the weight of this choice.