

German public television turns out propaganda on Ukraine

Sibylle Fuchs
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Both of Germany's public television broadcasters, ARD and ZDF, have come under sharp criticism for their blatantly biased reporting on Ukraine. They have adopted one-sided, favourable coverage of the right-wing nationalists in government in Kiev, branded Russia as solely responsible for causing the ongoing conflict and downplayed the role of fascist groups acting with support from the government.

We have already reported on the criticisms made of ARD. But in the case of Germany's second public broadcaster, ZDF, a number of violations of objective reporting have also been brought to light.

Armand Presser in the September 18 *Jüdische Allgemeine Zeitung* [*Jewish General Newspaper*, a weekly publication] criticised ZDF's reportage on the Azov Battalion, which was fighting on behalf of the Kiev government in Mariupol in eastern Ukraine. The group's helmets and uniforms are emblazoned with Nazi symbols like swastikas, SS runes and Wolfsangels, leaving no doubt about their political significance.

"This passed without comment," wrote the *Jüdische Allgemeine*, and posed the question "What has happened to ZDF's journalistic diligence?" The ZDF correspondent merely commented on the troops with the Nazi symbols in his report: "Voluntary battalions from almost all political backgrounds are strengthening the government side, and in Ukraine there is an election campaign: this has not made a peaceful solution any easier."

Presser commented in the *Jüdische Allgemeine*, "The aversion to Russian policy is encouraged and is growing. 'Putinisation' has become a fashionable expression in political commentary. Is our so-called Western freedom now being defended in Mariupol by paramilitary fascists, whose units back the National

Socialist [Nazi] ideology?"

It is not known if those responsible at ZDF have responded to the *Jüdische Allgemeine*. But in questions directed to ZDF's chief editor Peter Frey, Left Party deputy Christine Lüttsch, who is also a member of ZDF's supervisory council, referred to the report in the *Jüdische Allgemeine*. She questioned the presentation of the Azov Battalion without comment. Frey subsequently responded that he felt offended by the tone of her question and would not dignify it with an answer.

It was Frey who also recently insured that the satirical program "Die Anstalt" ["The Institute"] was removed from ZDF's online media player. This occurred after leading journalists Stefan Cornelius from the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Josef Joffe and Jochen Bittner from *Die Zeit* and Gunter Nonenmacher and Klaus-Dieter Frankenberger from the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* complained to ZDF management about their depiction as warmongers by the program.

Frey sits alongside Cornelius and Frankenberger on the advisory council of the Federal Academy for Security Policy (BAKS), a think tank close to the defence ministry, and he is also fellow of the Centre for Applied Political Research (CAP), funded by Germany's largest private media concern, the Bertelsmann Foundation. Frey embodies the close interconnection between German politics, big business and the media.

The "Initiative for a Permanent Public Conference" (ISP) has also identified several incorrect reports and misinterpretations in ZDF's coverage, as well as that of ARD. One example involved an incident in May 2014, when shots were fired in Krasnoarmeysk, a city in eastern Ukraine, as voters sought to take part in a referendum on the region's independence. Both

broadcasters reported at the time that pro-Russian rebels had shot at civilians. In fact, it was the Ukrainian national guard that stormed a polling station and shot supporters of the separatists. Maren Müller, chairman of the ISP stated that both broadcasters should have known better.

In a letter to the head of ZDF, Thomas Bellut and the chairman of the broadcast council, Ruprecht Polenz (Christian Democrat), she criticised the “presentation without comment of forbidden fascist symbols and insignia, as well as the downplaying of those carrying them, within one news broadcast of the public service broadcaster ZDF.” The letter cited a number of broadcast guidelines that had been breached by the report.

ZDF rejected these accusations, claiming that the news report did not violate Paragraph 86 of the criminal code, which criminalises the use of fascist symbols, because the report had been about “contemporary events.” In the report, Ukrainian militiamen with swastikas and similar symbols were presented, which were supposedly explained in the text. The reporter had mentioned “hardliners” and voluntary battalions “from almost all political backgrounds.” In fact, the fascist character of these groups was not discussed in this and other reports.

In a report on the ceasefire in Ukraine, ZDF’s “Heute Journal” on September 5 displayed the Wolfsangel, a fascist symbol also popular among German neo-Nazis, on several occasions. When this symbol is shown in connection with right-wing extremist organisations, it is a criminal offence. Müller also criticised ZDF for not mentioning anything about the right-wing background of the Azov Battalion, presenting its members instead as “freedom fighters.”

The BBC reported on the horrific crimes of the Azov Battalion in Sloviansk in July. The British news report made clear that the Ukrainian regime and its backers in Washington and the European Union had deliberately deployed this fascist militia against the population in eastern Ukraine, giving them a free hand to act as they please.

The Azov Battalion, financed by the oligarch Ihor Kolomoyskyi, also recruits outside of Ukraine. International right-wing extremists fight in its ranks. It is led by the avowed fascist Andriy Biletsky, head of the national social assembly (SNA). Biletsky

campaigns for the racial purification of the nation. He describes the “sub-humans” led by “semites” as the enemy. He claims it is the duty of the Ukrainian people “to lead the white peoples of the world in their last crusade in the struggle to survive.” Among other things, the Azov Battalion calls on its web site for the severe punishment of inter-racial sexual relations. It wants “to prepare Ukraine for further expansion and fight for the liberation of the entire white race from the domination by global speculative capital.”

The deliberate downplaying of fascist forces in Ukraine by German public broadcasters cannot be dismissed as accidental or unintended. The manipulation of the news is intended to strengthen the German government’s policy, which includes close collaboration with the regime in Kiev and its fascist allies.



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