

Bandera supporters march in major Ukrainian cities after government names Nazi collaborators “national heroes”

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On January 1, 2020, far-right elements and government officials participated in processions in the major Ukrainian cities Kiev, Odessa, L’viv, and Dnipro, to honor the Nazi collaborator Stepan Bandera’s 111th birthday. As head of the far-right Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and its military formation the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), Bandera was responsible for the massacre of hundreds of thousands of Jews and Poles during World War II.

While the demonstrations were relatively small—a torchlight procession in Kiev attracted about 1,000 or 2,000 people—and apparently smaller than in past years, they were supported and promoted by the Ukrainian state.

The demonstrations in both Kiev and L’viv were held with the explicit support of the local government authorities. City and regional officials attended the procession in L’viv, and in Kiev a giant banner of Bandera was hung over a city administration building. In Odessa, which was the site of a horrific fascist massacre in May 2014, a few dozen people participated in the procession.

The governments of Israel and Poland issued a rare joint condemnation of the ongoing efforts within Ukraine to rehabilitate far-right historical figures associated with the murder of both Jews and Poles during World War II.

Earlier in June, the same ambassadors had addressed a letter to the mayor of another western Ukrainian city, Ivano-Frankivsk, where a monument in honor of UPA General Roman Shukeyvych was unveiled.

As leader of the UPA, Shukeyvych was instrumental in carrying out the ethnic cleansing of Poles and Jews in western Ukraine. In addition to being a general in the UPA, Shukeyvych also served as a commander in the Nazi-led Nachtigall Battalion and 201st Schutzmannschaft Battalion made up of Ukrainian far-right nationalists.

In a 1944 military directive, Shukeyvych openly declared his objectives, stating, “In view of the success of the Soviet forces it is necessary to speed up the liquidation of the Poles, they must be totally wiped out, their villages burned...only the Polish population must be destroyed.”

The demonstrations in support of Bandera occurred days after the Ukrainian government extended the list of Ukrainian “national heroes” by several additional Nazi collaborators and notorious anti-Jewish pogromists in December 2019. Among those named “national heroes” are the Hetman Bohdan Khmelnytsky, who led a Cossack insurrection against the Polish nobility in 1648 during which massacres of an unprecedented scale against the Jewish population occurred.

While exact numbers remain disputed among historians because of the poor source base, up to 200,000 Jews are believed to have been murdered during the rampages of Khmelnytsky’s armies.

Maksym Zalizniak, a Cossack commander who led a pogrom in 1768 in Uman that resulted in the death of up to 20,000 Jews and Poles, was also named a “national hero”.

Several other newly named “national heroes” are notorious for their collaboration with and public support for the Nazis that occupied Ukraine from 1941 until the liberation by the Red Army in 1943-1944. These include Andriy Melnyk, one of the leaders of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), who headed a wing that broke off from Bandera’s OUN-B, and Ulas Samchuk.

As a member of Melnyk’s branch of the OUN, Samchuk worked for the Nazi administration of the Reichskommissariat Ukraine. He considered Nazi Germany the only reliable ally of Ukraine, arguing that “the main enemy of the Ukrainian people is the Muscovy-

kike Bolshevism”. It is now estimated that between 1.2 and 1.6 million Ukrainian Jews were murdered by the Nazis and their Ukrainian collaborators under the purview of the Reichskommissariat.

In 1944, Samchuk fled from the advancing Red Army to Germany. He eventually ended up in Canada as one of the many former Nazi collaborators who were allowed to spread fascist propaganda and historical falsifications on behalf of the imperialist powers during the Cold War.

The naming of these individuals as “national heroes” means that their birthdays will be commemorated with state support throughout 2020, including through festivals and processions. While Israel has condemned the additions to the “national heroes” list, the principal backers of the Ukrainian government, most notably the US and Germany, have maintained complicit silence on the ongoing rehabilitation of fascist forces in the country.

The US- and German-backed coup in February 2014, in which far-right forces played a central role, was a critical turning point in the rehabilitation of fascist traditions and forces by the Ukrainian state. In 2015, the Ukrainian parliament passed a law rehabilitating Nazi collaborators from the UPA and OUN, and banning any public criticism of these organizations. Meanwhile, the government illegalized the public display of all symbols related to communism and the Red Army, which ended the Nazi terror in Ukraine during World War II.

Although elected on the basis of promises to discontinue the policies of the widely hated Poroshenko and to end the war in East Ukraine, President Volodymyr Zelensky has essentially continued the promotion of the far right of his predecessor.

Zelensky’s prime minister, Oleksiy Honcharuk appeared on stage in front of a swastika at a neo-Nazi rock concert in Kiev to commemorate the official state holiday “Defender of Ukraine Day.” Zelensky’s minister of veterans affairs and temporarily occupied territories, Oksana Koliada, likewise attended the neo-Nazi concert and had previously been photographed with members of the neo-Nazi C14 group.

Zelensky’s administration has expanded its support for and public overtures to fascist forces in recent months as it has come under great pressure from the far right because of its initiation of negotiations with Russia, Germany and France over a settlement of the conflict in East Ukraine. In October, thousands of far-right supporters demonstrated against the negotiations and any “concessions” to Russia. Zelensky was then forced to sit down with members of the Azov Battalion when he

ordered a minor withdrawal of Ukrainian troops from the frontlines in an attempt to fulfill parts of the German-backed Steinmeier formula.

Zelensky’s delegation to the Paris summit in December, where Ukraine negotiated with Russia, Germany and France over a settlement, included the interior minister, Arsen Avakov, the only holdover from the previous Poroshenko regime. Avakov has well-known ties to the Azov battalion, and his ministry regularly turns a blind eye to the attacks and murders committed by far-right forces. Following the negotiations in Paris, Avakov’s public role in Ukraine has been significantly increased.

That same month, the Kiev Sixth Court of Appeals upheld a previous decision by Kiev’s City Council to rename Kiev’s Moskovsky Avenue to in honor of Stepan Bandera and change Avenue of General Vatutin into Avenue of Roman Shukhevych. Also in December, veterans of the war in eastern Ukraine affiliated with the neo-Nazi Right Sector battalion carried out a targeted assassination attempt against a Kiev City Council member that resulted in the death of his three-year-old son.

These incidents passed without any significant comment from Zelensky himself. Conversely, Zelensky lent his support to the Ukrainian soccer player Roman Zozulya who had been heckled by fans while playing in Spain over his ties to Ukraine’s far-right. Zozulya, who in 2015 posted a picture of himself next to Bandera on Twitter and openly supports the neo-Nazi Azov Battalion, was called a “true patriot” by Zelensky in a Facebook post.

The authors also recommend:

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