

Ukrainian government plans book banning on massive scale

David Walsh
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In an interview with the Kyiv-based Interfax news agency in late May, Oleksandra Koval, director of the Ukrainian Book Institute (UBI), estimated that more than *100 million* copies of “propaganda books,” including Russian classics, needed to be removed from Ukrainian public libraries.

The UBI, according to its own website, “is a government entity, part of the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine.” The institute’s mission is to shape government policy “in the area of book publishing, promote book reading in Ukraine, support book industry, provide incentives for translations and popularize Ukrainian literature abroad.”

Koval, in the course of her interview, explained that she hoped the first phase of the purge, removing “the ideologically harmful literature published in the Soviet times ... of which there is so much, as well as the Russian literature with anti-Ukrainian content,” would be completed by the end of the year.

She indicated that, first and foremost, books “that reinforce imperial narratives and promote violence, pro-Russian and chauvinistic policies” would be withdrawn from public libraries. What books those would be she failed to mention.

In the second stage, books by Russian authors published after 1991 would be “confiscated.” These would be of “different genres, too, including children’s books, and romance novels, and detective stories.”

So no one would mistake the profoundly reactionary character of the project, Koval went out of her way to include classics of Russian literature among the books slated to be banned. Writers and poets such as Alexander Pushkin and Fyodor Dostoyevsky, she claimed, had laid the foundation for the “Russian-speaking world” and “Russian messianism.”

“It’s really very harmful literature,” Koval went on,

according to Interfax, which can “influence people’s views. Therefore, my personal opinion is that these books should also be removed from public and school libraries.” They should probably stay in university and research libraries “to be read by academics studying the roots of evil and totalitarianism,” she added.

Koval indicated that scientific libraries might hold on to “specialized scientific literature the authors of which may have anti-Ukrainian views” for the moment, “but only if the scientific book in question has no ideological connotations,” reported the news agency. “There is no reason to withdraw it first until some replacement is created by Ukrainian or foreign authors,” she asserted.

The 100 million books targeted for confiscation represent fully *half* of the libraries’ holdings, “and replenishment will take place gradually.”

Revealingly, the English-language version of the Interfax account of its interview with Koval did not include the final paragraph of the original. Apparently, the news agency was embarrassed by the comment of Ukraine’s Minister of Culture and Information Policy (and former media company executive and CEO) Oleksandr Tkachenko “that Russian propaganda books confiscated from Ukrainian library funds may be used for waste paper.”

The vileness of the project envisioned by the “Book Institute” and the “Ministry of Culture” (if “Orwellian” were not an over-used term, it would be appropriate here) banning and perhaps pulping 100 million books, cannot be overstated. Many right-wing governments, often urged on by religious zealots (Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, etc.), have attacked individual titles and even genres in recent decades, but the destruction of half of a country’s library holdings has no obvious precedent.

The Nazi regime in Germany made the most

concerted effort to date to uproot and destroy a country's intellectual, cultural and moral heritage. The notorious public book burnings began in Germany in May 1933. The list of persecuted German-speaking authors was extensive, including Albert Einstein, Friedrich Engels, Sigmund Freud, Franz Kafka, Karl Marx, Rosa Luxemburg, Erich Maria Remarque, Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, Joseph Roth, the Mann brothers, Franz Wedekind and many others. Tens of thousands of volumes were incinerated in the first bonfires, from a list of approximately 4,000 titles.

Works by French, British, Irish and American authors were also included, among the latter Henri Barbusse, André Gide, Joseph Conrad, D.H. Lawrence, James Joyce, Oscar Wilde, Theodore Dreiser, Jack London and F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Whether the Ukrainian nationalists are directly inspired by the Nazis' efforts or not, and some of them may well be, the book banning reveals their extreme chauvinist, anti-communist and authoritarian outlook.

More or less approvingly, the *New York Times* reported June 7 that Ukrainian authorities were seeking to "decolonize" their country by changing the names of streets and subway stops that "evoke the history of the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union." Of course, much of this work was already carried out in the wake of the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, but Ukrainian officials are now attempting to complete the filthy job.

The *Times* cited the comment by Andriy Moskalenko, the deputy mayor of Lviv and the head of a committee that reviewed the names of each of the city's streets, "We are defending our country, also on the cultural front lines ... And we don't want to have anything in common with the killers." The "enemy goes by the name," as the *Times* puts it, of "Pavlov. Or Tchaikovsky. Or Catherine the Great." The name of the great Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy, honored in every part of the globe, will be removed from a subway stop in Kiev.

In early June, Deputy Minister of Education of Ukraine Andriy Vitrenko reported that the Ministry had made a decision to exclude Tolstoy's *War and Peace* from the school curriculum, as well as all other works in which the Russian army was "glorified."

"As for foreign literature, it will completely be eliminated ... For example, *War and Peace*, and the

like, it will not be studied in Ukraine. That is, everything that glorifies the 'Orcs Army,' everything will disappear from the program," Vitrenko told TV Ukraine 24.

Ironically, or not, the Nazis also targeted Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, along with Isaac Babel, Maxim Gorki, Vladimir Lenin, Vladimir Mayakovsky and Leon Trotsky.

The Ukrainian actions have both a poisonous and an absurd character. As *Al Jazeera* recently noted, "The line between what and who is Ukrainian or Russian was often blurred. Pyotr Tchaikovsky, whose Nutcracker suite has become a Christmas season mainstay, or Igor Stravinsky, whose 60-year career redefined Western classical music, had Ukrainian roots."

And what do officials plan to do about novelist and short story writer Nikolai Gogol, one of the immortal and pioneering figures of Russian literature, who was of Ukrainian origin? Or Mikhail Bulgakov? Or Anna Akhmatova? Of course, they will already have banned the Soviet poet Mayakovsky, saving them the embarrassment of having to deal with a literary figure born to a Ukrainian mother.

By themselves, Ukraine's book and cultural purges explode the myth that there is anything remotely "democratic" and "freedom-loving" about the Zelensky government, infested with fascist elements.



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