

New Zealand university hosts exhibition glorifying Ukrainian fascists

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Victoria University of Wellington (VUW) in New Zealand is currently hosting an installation designed to promote the US-NATO proxy war being waged by Ukraine's military against Russia, while whitewashing the Ukrainian regime and its fascist supporters.

The exhibition, titled "Ukraine: The Cost of Freedom," was exhibited in the Auckland War Memorial Museum during September and October, before moving to Wellington last month.

The display at VUW was mounted by the Ukrainian Gromada of Wellington (UGW). This group is affiliated with the Ukrainian World Congress (UWC), a network of organisations founded in 1967 in New York to oppose the Soviet Union from the standpoint of right-wing Ukrainian nationalism and anti-communism.

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the UWC has served as an important propaganda arm of Volodymyr Zelensky's regime, staging rallies and raising funds for Ukraine's war effort, while demanding more direct military action against Russia by the US and NATO.

The UGW, along with the Ukrainian Association of New Zealand, is calling for the Labour Party-led government to expel Russia's ambassador, and to provide more funding, weapons and training for Ukraine's armed forces.

Jacinda Ardern's government has already declared its "unwavering" commitment to the war against Russia and has sent more than 200 soldiers to help train Ukrainian forces in the UK, gather intelligence, and coordinate supplies for the war.

The exhibition at VUW falsely depicts the Ukrainian regime as the blameless victim of "unprovoked" Russian aggression aimed at "denying Ukraine its statehood and killing indiscriminately."

Vladimir Putin's invasion was certainly reactionary: it has led to thousands of deaths, along with rampant inflation that is devastating millions of people throughout the world. The war, however, was deliberately prepared and instigated by the US and NATO, which have for years militarily encircled Russia, carrying out military provocations, and in 2014 supported a coup in Ukraine that overthrew a pro-Russian government.

The coup is glorified in the VUW exhibition as a "Revolution of Dignity" carried out to integrate Ukraine into the European Union. It was led by far-right US-backed forces, which brought to power a viciously anti-Russian government. This sparked a civil war with the eastern provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk with large ethnic Russian populations, and Russia's annexation of Crimea.

The long-standing aim of US imperialism is to counter its economic decline by securing its domination over the entire Eurasian landmass—with its vast natural resources and working class population—even if this means war with both Russia and China.

A central aspect of the VUW installation is its glorification of the Azov Battalion, a fascist militia founded following the 2014 coup, which has been integrated into Ukraine's military and promoted, trained and funded

by the US and its allies.

A wall panel states: "Azov Battalion, praised as 'our best warriors' by President Petro Poroshenko (2014–2019) became part of our National Guard under government command. Putin then played upon and inflated Azov's far-right links with false propaganda about Ukrainian 'Nazi' government."

While admitting that Azov was founded by "a person with far-right views," the text claims that the organisation's "radical core" has been diluted by the influx of new fighters. This assertion is not backed up by anything and flies in the face of reality.

Azov, along with other militias like the Right Sector's Ukrainian Volunteer Corps and the country's military leadership itself, is teeming with fascists, racists and anti-Semites. Its founder Andriy Biletsky is a white supremacist who in 2010 stated that Ukraine had a mission to "lead the white races of the world in a final crusade ... against Semite-led *Untermenschen* [subhumans]."

Azov forged links with other neo-Nazi and white supremacist organisations internationally, including the Rise Above Movement and the Atomwaffen Division in the US, and has played a significant role in recruiting foreign fighters for the Ukraine war. The militia uses Nazi symbols, including—until a recent rebranding—the Wolfsangel used by Hitler's SS, and the Black Sun, which was used by terrorist Brenton Tarrant, who massacred 51 people in two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand in March 2019.

Like the Ukrainian government, the Azov Battalion promotes Stepan Bandera as a national hero. As the leader of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), Bandera collaborated with the Waffen SS during World War II in carrying out the Holocaust in Ukraine. The OUN viewed Nazi Germany as an ally in the struggle to restore capitalism to Ukraine and break from the Soviet Union.

The VUW exhibition includes a picture of Bandera alongside a map of Ukraine, with two other OUN leaders, Yevhen Konovalets and Roman Shukhevych. During World War I, Konovalets led the Sich Riflemen, which began as a unit of Ukrainian soldiers within the Austro-Hungarian army. He played a leading role in the operation to crush the January 1918 uprising of workers in Kyiv supporting the Russian Revolution.

Shukhevych was a leader of the OUN's armed wing, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, which directly participated in the massacre of tens of thousands of Poles and Jews in WWII. He was also a commander in the Nazis' Nachtigall Battalion, and a deputy commander of the Schutzmannschaft 201 auxiliary police battalion.

None of these facts are explained in the exhibition, which presents a right-wing nationalist version of Ukraine's history aimed at relativising the Nazi Holocaust.

Under the subheading "~7 mil. Ukrainian lives paid to win World War II," the wall text declares: "The world knows about the atrocities of Hitler, but many do not realise that his regime was just an ambitious student that surpassed (arguably) its real teacher, Stalin and his Soviet

killing machine.” The text falsely equates the actions of the Soviets and the Nazis in Ukraine, saying that both sides showed “especial hatred towards ethnicities deemed unwanted and massacred.”

The “History of Ukraine” panel does not mention the genocide of the Jewish people by the Nazis (assisted by the OUN). Nor is there any acknowledgement of the decisive role played by the Soviet Red Army, which included about 4.5 million Ukrainian soldiers, in defeating the Nazi war machine.

The claim that Stalin was the “real teacher” of Hitler, with the implication that the Soviet Union bears responsibility for the Holocaust, is part of an extreme right-wing narrative promoted during the 1980s by Nazi apologists such as Ernst Nolte in Germany. More recently, these claims have been repackaged by propagandists for US and German imperialism against Russia, such as Jörg Baberowski and Timothy Snyder.

While leaving out the Holocaust, the VUW exhibition presents right-wing propaganda that the Soviet famine of 1932–33 was a genocide, or “Holodomor” (death by starvation), of the Ukrainian population which “Stalin designed, and Soviet servants eagerly conducted.”

The famine killed about 7 million people across the Soviet Union, and while Ukraine suffered disproportionately with 3.5 million deaths, there is no evidence to suggest there was a deliberate plan by Moscow to kill Ukrainians. It was primarily the outcome of the Stalinist bureaucracy’s disastrous agricultural policies, including forced collectivisation in the countryside. The persecuted Left Opposition led by Leon Trotsky condemned these policies, which were the outcome of Stalin’s reactionary nationalist program of building “socialism in one country.”

Stalin represented the nationalist reaction against the 1917 Russian Revolution. He led a privileged bureaucracy, which consolidated its power during the 1920s and 1930s through the mass murder, imprisonment and exile of Left Oppositionists who fought to preserve workers’ democracy in the Soviet Union, and to defend the internationalist program of world socialism that underpinned the revolution.

In lurid anti-communist language, the “Cost of Freedom” exhibition states that the founding of the Soviet Union in 1922 led to Ukraine being “imprisoned by Bolsheviks” and oppressed by a “Red horde of seasoned soldiers infected with promises of wealth redistribution.”

In reality, the 1917 revolution was an uprising of millions of workers and peasants, including in Ukraine, against the tsarist empire. Millions subsequently joined the Red Army to defend the gains of the revolution against imperialist intervention during the Civil War.

As the WWS has explained, “the Soviet Union, based on workers’ power, was deeply committed to the defense of the democratic and national rights of all the nationalities that had been oppressed by the tsarist regime. The bureaucratic degeneration of the Soviet Union, personified in Stalin’s rise to power, found particularly acute expression in the violation and suppression of the legitimate democratic aspirations of the national minorities within the USSR.”

Today, both the Ukrainian and Russian regimes share an intense hatred of socialism and the working class. Three days before launching the invasion of Ukraine, Putin gave a lengthy speech which glorified the tsarist regime and denounced Vladimir Lenin and the Russian Revolution for “creating” the Ukrainian state. The oligarchies represented by Putin and Zelensky enriched themselves through the looting of state-owned property following the Stalinists’ dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the restoration of capitalism.

The war in Ukraine, in the final analysis, is the outcome of the break-up of the Soviet Union. This led to the creation of intensely nationalistic states across Eastern Europe, serving as military outposts for NATO and US imperialism. Meanwhile, the working class across the region suffered a catastrophic decline in its standard of living due to the evisceration of social programs.

Now, millions of working people face an ever-expanding war whose

purpose is to defend, on one side, the profits of the Russian bourgeoisie, and on the other, those of the US and NATO imperialists and their puppets in Kyiv.

The fact that Victoria University of Wellington and the Auckland War Memorial Museum have provided a platform for extreme right-wing propaganda in the service of the US-NATO war against Russia must be taken as a warning by students and young people. As is the case internationally, universities in New Zealand are being transformed from places of learning and objective historical research into centres for the promotion of war and right-wing ideology.

VUW is playing a central role. In August 2019, its Centre for Strategic Studies hosted a talk by NATO secretary-general Jens Stoltenberg, who hailed the military build-up in nations bordering Russia, and denounced “China’s role and influence” as another “threat” to the “rules-based order” dominated by US imperialism and its allies. A few months later the university hosted a presentation by Anne-Marie Brady, a prominent NATO-funded academic who has demanded more open support from Wellington for the US-led military build-up against China.

The current exhibition is a continuation of this campaign aimed at integrating New Zealand more closely into the US war drive. This requires the relentless demonisation of Russia and the whitewashing of fascism in Ukraine. It also entails the falsification of history in order to smear the Russian Revolution, which brought an end to the First World War and charted the path for abolishing the source of war: the capitalist system and its division of the world into antagonistic nation states.

The study of the Russian Revolution is indispensable for young people and workers who are seeking the means to prevent a catastrophic third world war involving nuclear-armed powers. As was the case in 1917, building an anti-war movement today requires a revolutionary socialist strategy to unite the working class in every country, including Ukrainian and Russian workers, against their capitalist rulers.

We call on students at VUW and other universities in New Zealand to oppose the pro-imperialist propaganda barrage. Join the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), which is fighting to build a global anti-war movement, based on socialist and internationalist principles.

Read and share our statement, “A call to youth throughout the world: Build a mass movement to stop the Ukraine war!” and attend the IYSSE’s global webinar on December 11 at 7 a.m. New Zealand time.



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