

The 1619 Project and the New York Times' promotion of the racist ideology of Ukrainian nationalism

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The 1619 Project, launched in 2019 by the *New York Times*, sought to rewrite American history in the service of contemporary domestic identity politics. While it was promoted as a supposedly “anti-racist” endeavor and part of a “national reckoning” with race, it was subjected to rigorous criticism on the *World Socialist Web Site* in collaboration with leading historians of American history, both in terms of the project’s factual inaccuracies as well as its racist method. As the controversy attracted national attention, project author Nikole Hannah-Jones responded on social media by implying that these criticisms were motivated by “anti-black” racism.

It is worth revisiting this controversy in light of the *New York Times*’ subsequent coverage of the war in Ukraine. This coverage has been marked by repeated efforts to legitimize the racist ideology of the US-backed Ukrainian nationalists, who are playing a central role in the escalating proxy war that is now well into its second year.

Last month, the *Times* reached a new low with the publication of an article that can only be described as the opposite of “anti-racist.” The April 18 article by London-based reporter Emma Bubola, “When Freezing Sperm Makes a Patriotic Statement,” celebrates Ukrainian men who are “preserving Ukrainian bloodlines” by freezing their sperm, which the *Times* hails as “patriotic” and an act of “defiance” against Russia.

“For many Ukrainians,” Bubola writes, “the idea of saving soldiers’ sperm is at once personal and patriotic ... It leaves open the possibility, at least, of preserving Ukrainian bloodlines even as the Kremlin insists that Ukrainian statehood—and by extension Ukrainians as a separate people—is a fiction.”

The phrase “preserving Ukrainian bloodlines” appears in the article without irony, qualification or quotation marks. Indeed, the whole thrust of the passage in context is that Ukrainians, in fact, are “a separate people,” contrary to the claims of “the Kremlin.”

Behind this talk of “Ukrainian bloodlines” and Ukrainians as “a separate people” is an utterly toxic racist ideology that was developed by the Ukrainian fascists parallel to German and other European fascist movements in the period leading up to the Second World War. The idea, which the *Times* does not dare to say out loud, is that “pure” Ukrainian blood will be corrupted if it is “mixed” with the blood of “impure” or “subhuman” people, including Russians, Jews or Roma people who are not part of the Ukrainian “national identity” being extolled by the *Times*.

The editors of the *Times* know very well that the government-backed “bloodline-preserving” endeavor they are celebrating is tainted by precisely that brand of poison. In the service of war propaganda, the *Times* not only conceals the hateful subtext but actively glorifies these conceptions, which have their American counterpart in the racist “great replacement” theory promoted by figures such as former Fox News personality Tucker Carlson. The *Times* passes this filth on to American

readers with an approving quote from a Ukrainian politician who claims that it represents “a continuation of our gene pool.”

The *Times*’ glorification of efforts at “preserving Ukrainian bloodlines” is not an isolated incident. Throughout its propaganda campaign in support of the escalating US intervention in the war, the *Times* has relentlessly promoted the efforts of far-right forces in control of Ukraine’s government to codify anti-Russian xenophobia into law. This includes a massive ongoing effort to erase Russian words and names from cities, streets and schools—an effort on such a scale that, if it had been undertaken by a US adversary like China, the *Times* would not have hesitated to label it as “genocide.”

On April 22, for example, the *Times* reported with approval the fact that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky had “signed two laws” that “strictly reinforce his country’s national identity, banning Russian place names and making knowledge of Ukrainian language and history a requirement for citizenship.”

In the course of the article, the *Times* reported the renaming of Leo Tolstoy street in Kiev. The Ukrainian authorities renamed the street in March to Hetman Pavlo Skoropadskyi Street, after a reactionary tsarist general who seized power in Ukraine in 1918 with the assistance of German imperialism.

Born in the Russian Empire (of which Ukraine was then a part) in 1828, Tolstoy was a pacifist, humanist and sharp critic of tsarist society who was excommunicated by the Russian Orthodox Church. He is known as the author of one of the masterpieces of Russian and world literature, the novel *War and Peace*.

Skoropadskyi, an anti-Bolshevik aristocrat, was a pathological anti-Semite. He publicly denounced the “parasitical tendencies of Jewry,” and his regime, backed by German imperialism, encouraged the distribution of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. He later fled to Germany, where he lived comfortably throughout the Nazi era before being killed in an Allied air strike in 1945.

Reporting that Tolstoy street had been renamed to Skoropadskyi street, the *Times* deliberately concealed from its readers the fact that Tolstoy’s replacement was a vicious racist. Instead, the newspaper dishonestly attempted to sidestep this history by presenting Skoropadskyi parenthetically as “a Ukrainian leader from the early 20th century.”

Imagine if the US government passed a law requiring all streets, cities and institutions in America with “Spanish” names to be renamed, beginning with the cities of El Paso and Los Angeles—and they were renamed instead after racist Confederate generals. In Ukraine, no less reactionary policies have the full-throated support of the *New York Times*.

This conscious effort to normalize the Ukrainian far-right has characterized all of the *Times* coverage of the conflict. The *Times* has repeatedly hailed Ukraine’s Azov Battalion as heroes at the forefront of

Ukraine's war effort, frequently featuring Azov soldiers in photos on its front pages. The *Times* conceals the battalion's fascist origins from readers. (The founder of the battalion, Andriy Biletsky, for example, claimed in 2010 that the Ukrainian nation's mission is to "lead the white races of the world in a final crusade ... against Semite-led Untermenschen [subhumans].")

In the same vein, the *Times* has repeatedly quoted without criticism or qualification the use of the slur "orcs" by Ukrainian military figures. This slur is an overt invocation of the Nazi trope of Russians as "subhuman," but the *Times* attempts to normalize it, embracing it in August of last year as "a derogatory term many Ukrainians reserve for Russian soldiers."

The linguistic style employed by the *Times* is fundamentally dishonest, designed to convey a false sense of lofty journalistic neutrality. If El Paso was renamed after Jefferson Davis, would the *Times* describe the president of the Confederate States of America in parentheses as "an American leader from the 19th century?" Would the *Times* describe a racial slur used by a government official in the US as merely "a derogatory term many Americans reserve for minorities?"

It should be recalled that the 1619 Project provided the ideological justification for a wave of lynch-mob style attacks on monuments to progressive American historical figures such as Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln and Ulysses S. Grant. In the wake of the publication of the 1619 Project, statues were vandalized and in many cases removed by local authorities.

American revolutionaries and abolitionists had to be "canceled" as the *Times* fanned the flames of historical ignorance and racial resentment, seeking to create favorable conditions for the Democratic Party to make an appeal based on identity politics. One memorable column in July 2020 by the *Times*' Charles Blow shouted that statues to George Washington should "abso-fricking-lutely" come down.

But on the subject of canceling historical figures, the *Times* raised no objection to renaming Tolstoy street to Skoropadskyi street, and has likewise raised no objection to the construction of public statues in Ukraine to Stepan Bandera, a Nazi collaborator, war criminal and Holocaust perpetrator.

A large statue to Bandera currently stands in the Ukrainian city of Lviv, for example, where one of the prominent streets has also been renamed in his honor. The *Times* is evidently in no hurry for that statue to come down, or for Ukraine to have any kind of "national reckoning" with that history.

If one puts the *Times*' "1619 Project" of 2019 side-by-side with its "Ukraine Project" of 2022-2023, one is confronted with: "Down with statues of Jefferson and Lincoln—and up with statues of Skoropadskyi and Bandera! Down with monuments to revolutionaries and abolitionists! Up with monuments to Nazi collaborators and anti-Semites!"

So much for the "anti-racism" of the *New York Times*! After all of the fanfare and self-congratulation around the 1619 Project, the *Times*' "anti-racism" turns out to be upside-down, superficial and arbitrary—to be turned on or off like a faucet, and to be invoked or ignored when it is politically expedient.

Lincoln was portrayed by the 1619 Project as a hopeless bigot, regardless of the fact that he signed the Emancipation Proclamation that freed four million people from slavery and transformed the Civil War into a social revolution. Jefferson, too, was "canceled," notwithstanding his famous universal declaration of human equality—that "all men are created equal." But when the *Times* turns its attention to Ukraine, fascists and racists like Skoropadskyi and Bandera are given a free pass.

Despite all of the contradictions on the surface, at a more profound level there is more to these positions than mere hypocrisy. The ease with which the *Times* has aligned itself with the Ukrainian far-right is a reflection of deeper issues involved in the controversy over the 1619 Project—and confirms the assessment of the project made by the *World Socialist Web*

Site.

Notwithstanding the "left" pretensions of many who endorsed the 1619 Project within and around the Democratic Party, the *World Socialist Web Site* insisted throughout the controversy that the politics of racial division are inevitably right-wing, inherently anti-democratic and inescapably serve reactionary ends.

The very first essay published by the *World Socialist Web Site* regarding the 1619 Project by David North, Niles Niemuth and Tom Mackaman took up the claim by Hannah-Jones in the series' introduction that all of American history is rooted in uncontrollable race hatred of "black people" by "white people." Specifically, according to Hannah-Jones, "anti-black racism runs in the very DNA of this country."

"This is a false and dangerous conception," the essay explained. Not only is the analogy to biology inappropriate in this context, it amounts to an idealist and irrationalist approach to history, deriving a historical narrative "from the existence of a supra-historical emotional impulse," namely intrinsic racial hatred.

The essay continued, "This irrational and scientifically absurd claim serves to legitimize the reactionary view—*entirely compatible with the political perspective of fascism*—that blacks and whites are hostile and incompatible species" (emphasis added).

In his lecture to the 2021 Socialist Equality Party Summer School regarding the 1619 Project controversy, Tom Mackaman insisted that "the position that human beings are pitted in never-ending struggle based on the mythological category of race has, in the past century, provided the ideological justification for the murder of tens of millions all over the world."

Indeed, when Hannah-Jones turned her attention to historical events that took place outside the US, the results of the application of her racistist method were highly offensive and downright horrific.

At a lecture at New York University following the publication of the 1619 Project, Hannah-Jones claimed that because substantially all of the Jews in Germany perished in the Holocaust, it eliminated the source of the underlying racial conflict. As a result, she asserted, anti-Semitism has allegedly disappeared in Germany. Hannah-Jones contrasted Germany with the United States, where, she implied, racial resentment still exists because white people and black people still have to interact with each other.

It goes without saying that these are sentiments with which the foulest Ukrainian neo-Nazi would enthusiastically agree. In this sense, it is no accident that the newspaper that attempted to place race "at the very center of our national narrative" in 2019 would go on in the next breath to align itself with Ukrainian nationalists who valorize the Nazi SS.

Last year, the *Times* published findings that Tucker Carlson had invoked the racist "great replacement theory" in more than 400 episodes of his Fox News show. The *Times* would do well to count the number of times that attempts to normalize the Ukrainian far-right have appeared in its own pages.

The alignment between the *New York Times* and the Ukrainian far-right is a confirmation of everything the *World Socialist Web Site* has published on the subject of the 1619 Project. These criticisms involved more than just pointing out factual errors in the project—although there were certainly many. On a more fundamental level, the racistist historical revisionism of the *Times* and the racistist ideology of the Ukrainian neo-Nazis share a common premise: the mythological reimagining of history as a struggle of "the nation" and "the race." It was this essentially reactionary historical and political content of the 1619 Project to which the *World Socialist Web Site* correctly objected in 2019.

A categorical break from that reactionary premise is necessary for any genuine struggle to confront and eliminate racism—as well as for the defense of historical truth, and for building a united global movement to reverse the descent towards another world war.



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