

Radio New Zealand removes references to 2014 Ukraine coup from online articles

Tom Peters
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In an extraordinary act of retroactive censorship, the state-owned broadcaster Radio New Zealand (RNZ) announced today that it has “corrected” 16 of its online articles about the war in Ukraine published over the past year.

Specifically, over the past three days RNZ has removed references to Ukraine’s 2014 coup—including the word “coup” and the fact that it was led by fascistic forces and backed by the US and NATO imperialist powers. References to the participation of the neo-Nazi Azov Battalion in Ukraine’s military have also been deleted.

Late last week, RNZ placed one staff member on leave pending an employment investigation and began “correcting” articles, originally published by Reuters and in one instance the BBC, which the employee had edited for the RNZ website.

This morning, RNZ chief executive Paul Thompson delivered a grovelling on-air apology for letting the changes go unnoticed for so long. “It’s so disappointing that this pro-Kremlin garbage has ended up in our stories. It’s inexcusable,” he said. Thompson has announced an external review of RNZ’s processes for the editing of online stories, and RNZ is reviewing hundreds of its articles.

In fact, the aim of RNZ’s latest “corrections” is to falsify the history of the war, in line with Washington’s propaganda that Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine was an “unprovoked” attack on a “democratic” country.

NATO general secretary Jens Stoltenberg recently admitted that the events of 2014 marked the real start of the war in Ukraine. The overthrow of the elected government of Russia-aligned Viktor Yanukovich was followed by the installation of a regime that included the fascist Svoboda Party and was violently anti-Russian. The coup sparked a civil war with the breakaway eastern provinces of Luhansk and Donetsk, and Russia’s annexation of Crimea.

Since 2014 the NATO powers and their allies have been pouring weapons into Ukraine and increasing their military spending dramatically in preparation for what is now a US-NATO proxy war with Russia, in which more than 200,000 Ukrainians and Russians have been killed and millions displaced. Since 2022, New Zealand has also provided millions of dollars for Kiev to buy weapons and the NZ military has been involved in training Ukrainian conscripts in Britain.

RNZ reporter Hayden Donnell falsely claimed that the suspended staff member had “edited [articles] to align with the Russian version of events.” In fact, it is entirely consistent to oppose Putin’s invasion—which was reactionary and has produced

a disaster—while recognising that Moscow was provoked by the 2014 coup and Kiev’s alignment with NATO.

Donnell and others pointed to a story published on Thursday by Reuters’ Guy Faulconbridge, which stated in its original version:

“The conflict in eastern Ukraine began in 2014 after a pro-Russian president was toppled in Ukraine’s Maidan Revolution and Russia annexed Crimea, with Russian-backed separatist forces fighting Ukraine’s armed forces.”

In the version that appeared on RNZ’s website, Reuters’ glorification of the coup as a “revolution” was removed and the passage changed to the following:

“The conflict in Ukraine began in 2014 after a pro-Russian elected government was toppled during Ukraine’s violent Maidan colour revolution. Russia annexed Crimea after a referendum, as the new pro-Western government suppressed ethnic Russians in eastern and southern Ukraine, sending in its armed forces to the Donbas.”

Another Reuters article in April was edited by the RNZ staffer to say that Russia launched its 2022 invasion “claiming that a US-backed coup in 2014 with the help of neo-Nazis had created a threat to its borders and had ignited a civil war that saw Russian-speaking minorities persecuted.”

Reuters has so far made no comment on the matter. The news agency reportedly allows minor editorial changes to its articles when they are republished by media organisations; major changes, however, are not permitted.

Be that as it may, the editorial changes by the RNZ employee have triggered a furious response, not because of some technical violation of the contract with Reuters, but because the changes undermined the US-NATO propaganda that is continuously churned out by the corporate media, including RNZ itself.

The facts are entirely on the side of the suspended worker, who is being smeared in the media as a “Russian sympathiser” and even an “agent.”

The 2014 overthrow of the Yanukovich government was a blatantly US-sponsored regime change operation. During the far-right protests, Victoria Nuland, US assistant secretary of state, discussed with ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt who should lead the next government in Kiev, including the vital role of the fascist Svoboda. Nuland also boasted that since 1991, when the Soviet Union was dissolved by the Stalinist bureaucracy, the United States had intervened heavily in Ukraine’s politics, investing “over \$5 billion” to push the country away from Russia.

The UK *Guardian*, in its report on the RNZ controversy, described the Maidan coup as a “peaceful” movement with “widespread public support.” It also said: “There is no evidence Russian speakers are ‘persecuted’ in Ukraine, a bilingual country.”

In fact, the coup was spearheaded by the fascist Right Sector militia, which unleashed horrific violence against opponents of the NATO-backed regime, including the massacre of at least 48 people in Odessa. On May 9, 2014, Kiev sent armed forces into Mariupol in eastern Ukraine, where they murdered at least 20 people, many of whom were commemorating the anniversary of the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany.

In the past year, the Zelensky regime has banned opposition political parties advocating a negotiated peace. Russian literature has been destroyed; and Soviet-era monuments demolished and replaced with monuments to Nazi collaborators like Stepan Bandera, whose Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) assisted in the mass murder of Jews and Poles during the Holocaust.

The *New York Times* recently admitted that embedded reporters have been concealing the widespread use of Nazi symbols in Ukraine’s military, in which fascist militias such as the Azov Battalion play a major role.

These facts are being covered up in the media pile-on that is now underway demonising the suspended RNZ staff member.

“One News” reported over the weekend that eight months ago “a group of Ukrainian New Zealanders complained about what they felt was Russian propaganda” in one of RNZ’s original articles on the war, published May 26, 2022.

The article quoted Mike Smith, former Labour Party general secretary, and former Labour government minister Matt Robson, who both expressed reservations about the current Labour government’s decision to provide military support for Ukraine. Smith was paraphrased as saying this was “inadvertently helping to arm neo-Nazi militias and far-right groups in Ukraine with modern weapons, which could be used elsewhere.”

On Sunday night RNZ supplemented the article with comments by former Pentagon staff member Paul Buchanan and NZ foreign minister Nanaia Mahuta defending New Zealand’s contribution to the war.

The main author of the complaint sent to RNZ and Broadcasting Minister Willie Jackson, Christchurch resident Michael Lidski, said the article was “a typical example of Russian propaganda.” He told “One News” the journalist responsible could be a “paid agent of influence” or a “useful idiot” expressing “enemy propaganda.”

Various “expert” commentators joined in the feeding frenzy. Verica Rupar, a journalism professor at AUT (Auckland University of Technology) told *Stuff* it was “very dangerous” to speculate about the motivations behind the RNZ edits, before musing: “It could be an individual, it could be a propaganda war.”

In the same article, Buchanan, who is often quoted in the media as a “security analyst,” declared that New Zealand had been “flooded by foreign disinformation and misinformation” and that Russia was “very, very good at spreading disinformation.”

Minister Jackson told *Stuff* he was “comfortable” with the RNZ

employee being investigated and said the broadcaster faced a “major issue... unprecedented for RNZ.”

The E t? union, which purports to represent media workers, has remained silent on the witch-hunt. The union’s former leader Andrew Little is now the Defence Minister in the Labour government.

The far-right opposition ACT Party, meanwhile, issued a McCarthyite media statement entitled “‘Red Radio’ issues Russian Propaganda.” Leader David Seymour demanded that RNZ’s chief executive “explain who changed the text, why they changed it, and what will be done to prevent RNZ becoming a conduit for Putin’s propaganda.”

The level of hysteria demonstrates that, as far as the media and political establishment are concerned, any reporting on the war that contradicts Washington’s propaganda must be suppressed as disinformation from “the enemy.”

As was the case in the lead-up to New Zealand’s entry into World Wars I and II, censorship is being tightened to cover up the real origins of the war in Ukraine, its imperialist character and to whitewash the Kiev regime as “democratic.” The aim is to intimidate and silence all opponents of the war, which is metastasizing into a global conflict between nuclear-armed powers, with catastrophic consequences.

The US and NATO are using the war in Ukraine to weaken Russia, and are moving closer to direct intervention to overthrow Putin and carve up Russia’s territory and resources. At the same time, Washington is preparing for war against China, which is viewed as the main rival to its global hegemony.

As a minor imperialist power in the Pacific, and a member of the US-led Five Eyes intelligence network, New Zealand’s ruling class is dragging the country into both conflicts.

The Socialist Equality Group in New Zealand condemns the reactionary witch-hunt against the RNZ employee and calls for their reinstatement. Above all, the events of the past few days reinforce the urgent need for the building of an international antiwar movement, based on the working class in opposition to Labour and all the capitalist parties, the media and the pseudo-left groups that have embraced imperialism.



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