

Ukrainian-Polish diplomatic crisis over Nazi collaboration exposes NATO war with Russia

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The diplomatic crisis over Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's promotion of anti-Polish Nazi collaborationist forces during World War II is stripping away the political lies in which the NATO imperialist powers have shrouded their proxy war with Russia in Ukraine. The NATO-backed regime in Ukraine is not a defender of democracy and national independence but a tool of imperialism resting upon far-right forces.

In late May, Zelensky issued a decree giving a serving military unit the honorary title "Heroes of the UPA." This referred to the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), the military wing of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), which collaborated with Nazi Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union. The OUN and its members in the Nazi auxiliary police participated in the genocide of Soviet Jews, including the 1941 Babi Yar massacre in Kiev. Many of these men went on to form the UPA, which hunted down pro-Soviet partisans in Ukraine and carried out a genocide of Poles in Volhynia in present-day western Ukraine.

On June 19, far-right Polish President Karol Nawrocki stripped Zelensky of Poland's highest state honour, the Order of the White Eagle, which Poland awarded Zelensky a year after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, in 2023. Nawrocki said that after he "repeatedly signaled" his government's concerns to the Zelensky government, its "position has not changed." However, he added, "facts are not subject to negotiation" and "at least 100,000 Polish citizens were murdered by the UPA."

The Zelensky regime responded by denouncing Warsaw and doubling down on its promotion of genocidal pro-Nazi forces. Zelensky mailed his medal back to Poland. Kyrylo Budanov, Ukraine's head of military intelligence (HUR) now head of the presidential office, said on June 20 that he had renounced Poland's Golden Officer's Cross of the Order of Merit, charging that in Poland, "the flywheel of hatred is unreasonably and artificially spun

against our citizens."

As a result, today, on the 85th anniversary of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, a full-throated propaganda campaign is underway defending Zelensky and the UPA. Former Ukrainian presidents Leonid Kuchma, Viktor Yushchenko and Petro Poroshenko have all vowed to return their Order of the White Eagle honors in solidarity with Zelensky. Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha denounced Warsaw's criticism as a "strategic mistake from which only Moscow benefits."

Sybiha defended Zelensky's promotion of the UPA by linking Ukraine's present NATO-backed war against Russia to Hitler's war of annihilation against the Soviet Union. Ukrainian statements of support for the UPA, he claimed absurdly, "had absolutely no anti-Polish intent." Instead, Sybiha argued, the goal was "honouring those who, similarly, many years ago, fought against imperial Moscow, Bolshevik-communist occupation."

Operation Barbarossa, the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, was the most horrific expression of imperialist counterrevolution against the October revolution and the working class. It was a war of annihilation, planned to create Lebensraum for German imperialism by annihilating "Judeo-Bolshevism" through starvation, slave labor, and mass murder of Jews, partisans and communists. By the time the Nazi war machine was crushed, 27 million Soviet citizens were dead.

Zelensky can defend and legitimize Nazi collaborationist forces in the Soviet Union only because he knows that he has the support for this operation from the major NATO imperialist powers. At the same time as Washington, Berlin and the other NATO powers poured billions of dollars into the Ukrainian regime, in the years preceding and following the 2022 Russian invasion, the Ukrainian regime systematically rehabilitated the fascist collaborators of World War II.

Streets were renamed for OUN leader Stepan Bandera,

and the Ukrainian parliament and military command have publicly celebrated Bandera's birthday. Openly neo-fascist formations such as the Azov Battalion, whose insignia borrow directly from the Waffen SS, were fully integrated into the armed forces and celebrated by the Western media as defenders of "democracy."

Days before the UPA decree, the Zelensky government repatriated and reburied the remains of Andriy Melnyk—an OUN leader and Nazi collaborator who had petitioned Hitler for the right to join the "crusade against Bolshevik barbarism"—in Kiev's National Military Cemetery. Zelensky personally hailed Melnyk as "deeply respected," declaring that Ukraine was building a "pantheon of national heroes." The *New York Times* described this blood-soaked figure as a "divisive 20th Century hero."

The intensifying glorification of fascism is an expression of the deepening crisis of the NATO proxy war and the collapse of the regime's popular support. In these conditions, the ruling oligarchy doubles down on a falsified national history to manufacture a chauvinist mythology with which to drive workers and youth into a catastrophic war.

The turn to the heroes of the OUN goes hand in hand with the turn to dictatorial forms of rule. Zelensky's own legal mandate as president expired in May 2024, yet he clings to power under martial law, having banned opposition parties, suppressed independent trade unions and outlawed any opposition to the war from the left.

While the Zelensky regime builds a pantheon of Nazi collaborators, it imprisons those who oppose the war from the left. Bogdan Syrotiuk, a young Ukrainian Trotskyist and a leader of the Young Guard of Bolshevik-Leninists, was seized by the Security Service of Ukraine in April 2024 and charged with high treason, which carries 15 years to life, for articles published on the *World Socialist Web Site*. He opposes the war from a socialist and internationalist standpoint, against both the NATO-backed government in Kiev and the Putin regime in Moscow. More than two years later he remains in pre-trial detention in Nikolaev, his health deteriorating, while the state that jails him honors the murderers of Volhynia as national heroes.

Across Europe the imperialist ruling classes are rehabilitating the collaborators of the Nazis, reviving militarism and falsifying the history of the 20th century to prepare new wars. The same process is underway in Germany, which launched the war of extermination against the Soviet Union in 1941 and is once again rearming and reviving its militarist traditions.

Students, workers and intellectuals who oppose the genocide in Gaza are branded antisemites, hounded from their campuses, fired from their jobs, arrested and deported. The charge of antisemitism has been weaponized into a bludgeon against all opposition to imperialist war. Yet the same governments that level this smear against opponents of mass murder are pouring weapons into a regime that erects monuments to the men who carried out mass murder.

The 85th anniversary of Operation Barbarossa is a warning. The same imperialist powers that once armed Hitler against the Soviet Union are again arming the most reactionary forces in Eastern Europe against Russia, in a war that threatens to erupt into open conflict between nuclear-armed states.

The conflict between Warsaw and Kiev is a falling-out between two capitalist governments, both subordinate to NATO and both enemies of the working class. Emphasizing that, for now, everything must be subordinated to the joint war effort, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk recently stated regarding the controversy "Co-operation serves the interest of both our states and nations, while conflict serves Moscow's interests."

Workers can defend neither the Zelensky regime nor its Polish and NATO patrons. Against the rehabilitation of Bandera and the persecution of socialists, the international working class must advance its own program: the unity of Ukrainian, Polish, Russian and all workers against their own ruling classes and the imperialist war they are waging. This is the fight led by the International Committee of the Fourth International, which demands the immediate freedom of Bogdan Syrotiuk. The fight against war and fascism is the fight for socialism.



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