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Blog-Shmog

The Neocons and Holocaust Revisionism in Eastern Europe

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July 23, 2014

Part One

by Dovid Katz To read Part Two, click [here](#). **IF THE INEXPLICABLY POWERFUL** neoconservatives (“neocons”) and their fellow-travelers could have had something to do with the initiation of a war in Iraq, on a premise of claimed weapons of mass destruction, and in the absence of links between Saddam Hussein and 9-11; *If* they can carry on as before in the wake of the mass suffering and decline in American prestige empirically resulting from that and other military misadventures; *If* they have succeeded now in affecting the Obama administration’s conduct of foreign affairs and the major Democratic Party hopeful for 2016... *Then* it goes without saying that far less formidable objectives — for example refashioning some ideas and established narratives of history that stand in the way of their sacred beliefs — are within their target range. In neocon patriarch’s Irving Kristol’s 2003 essay, “The Neoconservative Persuasion,” we read an encapsulation of those sacred beliefs, behind all of which, he writes, “is a fact: the incredible military superiority of the United States vis-à-vis the nations of the rest of the world, in any imaginable combination.” Of course, patriotic Americans are happy to know of the security accruing from their country’s military might. It is the cowboyization of that premise to the point of addiction to permanent

foreign martial adventures as the supposed measure of American greatness that is the focus of debate, as is the quest for a unipolar world. Never mind that American unipolarity is about as un-American an idea as could be fathomed, if taken in light of the Founding Fathers' writings and the chronicles of the actual cosmic success of American history. **CREDIT MUST BE GIVEN WHERE DUE**, if the politics of the neocons or allies played a part in the successful expansion of the European Union (in tandem with NATO), which has brought a much better way of life to a number of former Soviet satellites (among them the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland), and the three former Soviet Baltic republics (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia). It was only a matter of time, however, before the neocons, out of sorts in a post-Cold War world, would overreach, with "sic' 'em" gusto once Vladimir Putin turned towards authoritarianism and revanchism. A glance at any map of Europe takes us to the inevitable battleground that neocons would wish to "conquer for America." It is a vast and dynamic country situated between the new EU states and Russia: Ukraine. American dominance is their article of faith; Ukraine is the current testing ground. If any one neocon has become a guru for post-Iraq "maintenance" of "American dominance," as if dominance over all others were a *sine qua non* of healthy statehood, it is Robert Kagan, whose boss at the Brookings Institution, Clinton advisor Strobe Talbott, he seems to have mesmerized. Talbott and Kagan are among founders of the charming multi-party Secretary of State's "Foreign Affairs Policy Board," recently (and correctly) [exposed by Jacob Heilbrunn](#) as the neocons' new platform for bringing to bear neoconservative international power as policy for *both* political parties in the United States. It is a neocon insurance policy for staying in power in the Clinton wing of the Democratic party should the non-interventionist wing of the GOP become more dominant over there. Kagan's spouse is none other than Victoria Nuland, undersecretary of state for European and Eurasian Affairs. In concert with others, they have insinuated neoconservative strains deep into the Obama administration's foreign policy. A penetrating [New York Times article](#) by Jason Horowitz (June 2014) has unraveled the family and friendship web at the core of this disproportionately powerful, silver-tongued group. Kagan emerges as dominant, not least in the wake of his spouse being the United States's point-person on Ukraine. The journalistic hook for Horowitz's New York Times piece is a [May 2014 article](#) by Kagan, "Superpowers Don't Get to Retire: What our Tired Country Still Owes the World" in *New Republic*. At the start he complains about the "tepid" response to events in Syria and Russia/Ukraine. By the middle he is darned unsettled that in a poll "more than 50 percent agreed that it was 'more important' that the United States 'not get too involved in the situation in Ukraine' than that it 'take a firm stand' against Russia, which 29 percent found more

important." It is not long before everything boils down to the "p"-word, which is the final word of the sentence that follows, not its first: "Putin seeks to impose his view of a world order, at least in Russia's neighborhood, just as Europe and the United States do. Whether he succeeds or fails will probably not be determined merely by who is right and who is wrong. It will be determined by the exercise of power." **SO IT CAME TO PASS** that the State Department's Victoria Nuland, former foreign policy adviser to Dick Cheney, helped direct and cheerlead the lamentable descent of Ukraine from civil and peaceful — if rough-and-tumble and unseemly — political discourse into a spiral of violence and collapse of civil order unknown to the everyday citizens of Ukraine since the 1940s. It was [Ms. Nuland who publicly boasted](#), following her "third trip in five weeks to Ukraine" last December, that America had already sunk some \$5 billion into the Ukraine morass. That was outdone in popular memory by her now-immortal quote of 2014, not intended for ears other than ("just") the American ambassador to Ukraine: "[Fuck the EU.](#)" This because the European Union would have preferred a legal, nonviolent and democratic process of change in Ukraine. Beyond f-words and p-words, it became obvious that America was even stage-managing who would emerge in charge of Ukraine. (Incidentally, the disconcertingly obvious American Jewish component in the neocon mindset has masterfully been traced in Jacob Heilbrunn's *They Knew They Were Right: The Rise of the Neocons.*) In her [testimony to Congress](#) in May 2014, Nuland was questioned both by Representative Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA), chair of its Subcommittee on Europe and Eurasia, and by committee member Brad Sherman (D-CA). They both made clear that they understood Ukraine's situation to be rather more complex than (Western) good vs. (Eastern) evil. They wanted to know more about the involvement of far-right and neo-Nazi elements in the actual Maidan Square violence that led to one government's fall and another's rise. Nuland gave less than fully forthright answers, and the matter seems to have quieted down for now — but it will not go away. The use of neo-Nazis and far-right racists to overthrow a European government, and the spin used in covering it all up, does not represent one of the finer hours of American diplomacy. Nor was it a high point of mainstream American and Western media, most of which [caved in](#) to presenting the neocon version, embedded in the Obama administration's narrative, as simple fact. Some [real coverage](#) was provided by Britain's [BBC Newsnight](#) program and [Channel 4](#), and we are fortunate now to have the excellent study, "[Kiev's atrocities and the silence of the hawks](#)" by Stephen F. Cohen in *The Nation*. **YOU HAVE TO LIVE IN EASTERN EUROPE FOR YEARS** to understand, in a way that Americans and other Westerners cannot, the extent to which both far-right racists and their liberal opponents in this part of the world remain deeply tied to versions of World War II

history as if it were happening today. Even those many racists and anti-Semites who are far from the trappings of neo-Nazism or far-right parties and are charming mainstreamers in their own lives retain a religious-grade admiration for their wartime countrymen who collaborated with the Nazis in the extermination of their country's Jewish (and many other) citizens. These collaborators are seen as heroes of nationalism who stood up against the communists. It becomes a current obsession for them to see to it that the Nazis do not remain in history as the one great evil of the war, but become at least "one of two equal totalitarian regimes," with most blame locally placed upon the Soviet Union, leaving plenty of room for the interpretation that the Nazis were in many respects liberators of their lands, particularly in the 1941 Barbarossa invasion (which also unleashed the genocidal phase of the Holocaust). In other words, strange to tell, many racists are ipso facto Holocaust revisionists (we will be looking below in some more detail at the sophisticated and poisonous strain of the revisionist virus in play). On the other hand, for those dedicated to tolerance and respect for the diversity of humankind, and for principled anti-racists, and particularly for the minorities in these countries, the defeat of Hitler by the Anglo-American-Soviet led alliance is an ongoing source of pride. While the images of an American assistant secretary of state becoming a close supporter of far-right antics to effect regime change were disturbing enough, it is the image of Senator John McCain embracing Oleg Tyahnybok (at right, below), the head of the racist, antisemitic Svoboda party in Ukraine, last December that has become the most potent and permanent visual image of America's folly there. **MANY ELITES IN THE REGION** have chosen to build national myths of heroism not on great artists, thinkers, poets or scientists but on their own nation's Holocaust collaborators and perpetrators. Most typically, the basis for this is that these Holocaust perpetrators were *also* anti-Soviet and anti-Russian (which is in most cases absolutely true of East European collaborators and perpetrators of the Holocaust). The fact is that in the territories conquered by Hitler following upon the Barbarossa invasion of the USSR launched on 22 June 1941, local nationalist "heroes" in the Baltics and (western) Ukraine started humiliating, molesting and murdering Jewish neighbors even before the first German forces arrived. They went on to voluntarily and enthusiastically provide extensive manpower to do much (in some areas most) of the actual killing (very different from collaboration in the west, which entailed betrayal to the Gestapo, participating in deportations, and the like). During a quarter century of our thousands of interviews with Holocaust survivors from Lithuania, Latvia, Belarus and Ukraine, virtually all credit their survival (in contrast to their betrayal by nationalist neighbors) to the Soviet Union, which was the only serious force in Eastern Europe opposing the Nazis from Barbarossa through to the

end of the war. There were no American or British troops in those parts. Most of this small remnant of East European Jewry survived by fleeing eastward to Russia early on (the flight survivors). Some escaped ghettos to join up with the Soviet-sponsored partisans in the forests (the Jewish partisans). And some were saved by inspirationally brave, righteous gentiles (the *real* local heroes of 1941, who should be honored with statues and streets named for them) who hid them until the Soviets came and freed them in 1944. Why is this history important? First and foremost, because the attempts to falsify it are untrue and rooted in justification for and glorification of a racial-superiority nationalism that is inimical to the core values for which America made such enormous sacrifices during the Second World War. Ukrainian nationalists who worship statues, banners and monuments to Holocaust mass-murderer Stepan Bandera are inherently far-right racists, even when they dress up as centrists for the benefit of CNN. Anyone who has visited Ukraine at length knows that the Bandera-worshippers regard Jews, Russians and Poles (among others) as inferior beings whose existence is an unwelcome stain on the desired ethnic purity of the nation-state. Precisely in the spirit of 1930s Aryanism, in fact, Banderism in fact “gave them” pure(ish) ethnic enclaves in some of Ukraine’s west. But these are not American values. These are not values worth fighting for, even when they are invoked with the lame excuse of it being all just “against Russia,” as if this is a moral license to abrogate values. Russia’s misbehavior can and must be countered as a separate issue, not by giving succor to pro-Nazi forces whose attraction for us is that they are anti-Russia. Incidentally, this echoes the excuse offered for the Holocaust period itself with regard to the wiping out of races. One often hears that participation in the genocide of the Jewish civilian population was “part of what we had to do to get the Russian Communists out, because it’s what Hitler wanted, and we were sure that upon victory, Germany would restore our nation’s independence.” Aside from the moral repugnance of linking worthy independence with genocide of a minority living in your country, it is of course utter historic nonsense. The East European Slavs and Balts were themselves slated for future extinction as their lands were to become the new eastern pleasure-grounds of the master race’s Reich. Had the Nazis won the war, there would have been no Latvia, Lithuania or Ukraine to become independent in 1991. **BUT THE PLOT THICKENS.** Straight-talking policies in favor of glorifying local Nazi perpetrators — or even spinning away genocide on the grounds that it was just a by-product of the noble struggle against Soviet occupation — would never have made it past the West’s moral defenses. It all had to be reinvented and respun as only the teamwork of academics and political operatives could pull off. To make a long story short (and the longer version absolutely needs to be told), the nationalist leaders of a number of East

European states that were freed from the Soviet yoke, quietly working in concert with the wider neoconservative-allied community in the West, were developing a much more sophisticated strategy. They would write the Holocaust out of history as a unique event without denying a single death. They would insist that Soviet crimes (of which there were many, and many horrendous ones, too) would automatically be called "genocide" by way of courts and parliaments [inflating the word's meaning](#), by law, to encompass virtually all Soviet evils. They would go on to posit two equal genocides as the basis of World War II history. The new construct would graciously include study of the Holocaust-era genocide of the Jews, but it would have to be a study inextricably linked with ongoing activist revision of the narrative itself. That revision would come to include systematic blurring of the cardinal moral distinction between perpetrator and victim. The new narrative has it that the local perpetrators were themselves also "victims" (of Soviet occupation before the German invasion), and that the victims, particularly Holocaust survivors who fled ghettos to join up with the Soviet partisans in the forests, were also "[perpetrators](#)" because the resistance fighters opposing Hitler did not follow conventional warfare in those forests. Add to this a massive investment in bringing to Eastern Europe for honors, junkets and pleasure many significant (though unsuspecting) Western (and Jewish) figures of authority and presto, history is in grave danger of being rewritten in service to a perceived current geopolitical need of a far-right establishment on the very territory of the East European Holocaust. Best known as "[Double Genocide](#)," the new revisionist incarnation of Holocaust Denial is based on a series of symmetrical relativizations of the picture, in the spirit of the Facebook age making "complicated" the distinction between perpetrators and victims of the Holocaust, which is actually rather "simple." In Eurospeak, Double Genocide is often referred to as "equal evaluation of totalitarian regimes." Once written out of history as the (thankfully) unprecedented and unique event of genocide in Eastern Europe that it was, the Holocaust is readily replaced by a bogus history of "two equally genocidal regimes," Nazi and Soviet, that cancel each other out. For those who live in Eastern Europe, there is the oft-heard anti-Semitic version for locals: the Jews were almost all Communists anyway, the Communists committed genocide first, and then came Hitler and his local allies with the genocidal reaction and well, it's all over and done with, everyone is even. **BUT IF THERE WERE TWO HOLOCAUSTS** at that time, there was no Holocaust at all. By its nature, the idea (and the word) Holocaust (or Shoah) denotes a single phenomenon rather than a generic category into which an open (and inherently accruing) number of events can be placed during that time and in that place. The empirical basis for its validity becomes starkly evident to any person who travels through Eastern Europe (not just for academics who trade in

generic categories). The visitor comes upon thousands of towns populated by, for example, Belarusians, Czechs, Latvians, Lithuanians, Poles, Russians, but with only peripheral architectural remains of thousands of erstwhile Jewish communities. These include remnants of graveyards, synagogues, and other physical-culture traces — and, in the eastern part of the territory, ubiquitous mass grave sites (absent in those westerly parts where deportations to death camps rather than local mass shootings were the means of genocide). In both cases, the absence of living Jews, their language and presence, presents an unambiguous contrast to the happily surviving other populations and languages, majority or minority within any state borders in the region. The stark contrast between genocide (in Europe: the Holocaust), and non-genocidal crimes (Soviet occupation and crimes and ongoing Russian mischief) is striking. [Continue to Part Two](#) **Dovid Katz** is a Brooklyn-born, Vilnius-based independent Yiddish studies and Holocaust scholar. He edits [Defending History](#). From 1999 to 2010 he was professor of Yiddish language, literature, and culture at Vilnius University. His personal website is www.dovidkatz.net.

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