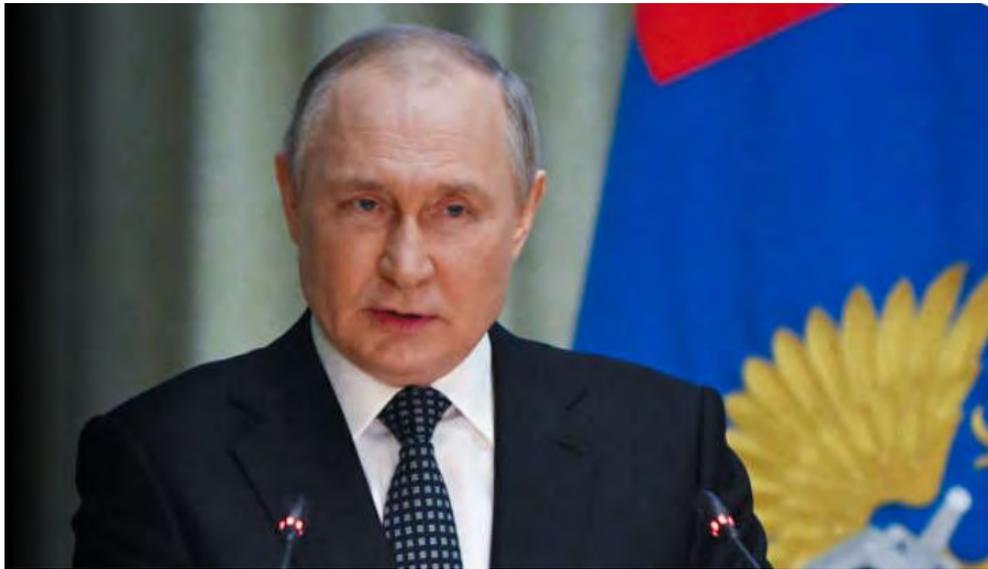


Why Russia thought its 'Nazi' claims would be convincing - analysis
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When Russia declared its invasion of Ukraine in late February it termed it a “special military operation” that was supposed to “denazify” Ukraine.

This simplistic propaganda was supposed to make it seem like there wasn't a war, Moscow was merely getting rid of “Nazis.” Russia has continued to use accusations of fighting “Nazis” to justify its war. It has even gone further now, with [Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov](#) claiming that Hitler had “Jewish blood.” This claim was in response to questions about how Russia could be fighting “Nazis” in Ukraine, if Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky is descended from Jews.

Why does Russia think this narrative will work? Moscow hasn't altered its message, it believes the “Nazi, Nazi” messaging about Ukraine will convince someone.

Who is this message for?

Is it for Russian citizens sent to fight in Ukraine?

Is it primarily for western audiences? The tendency to accuse people or countries or groups of being “Nazi” or “neo-Nazi” is very common in the West.

Western media often terms local political adversaries on the Right as “fascist” or “neo-Nazi” or “white supremacist.” Given this quick reference to the Nazis in political discourse in the West, it appears Moscow believed that shouting “Nazi” would convince some people that its campaign in Ukraine was legitimate.

Russia also does what some political groups in the West do, it took some examples of the Ukrainian far-right and labeled them Nazi and then used that to tar the whole of Ukraine.

A key example of this is the mention of the [Azov Battalion unit](#) as an example of how Russia is fighting “Nazis.” Russia uses its media and friends in the West to push claims that there are “Neo-Nazis” in Ukraine by referencing this one unit.

Russia's accusation that its enemies are "Nazis" or "fascists" has a long history going back to the 1920s. Communists mobilized against fascists in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s.

Later when Nazi Germany invaded Russia it was the turn of the Soviets to showcase their fight against Nazism and fascism. It is legitimate to note that the Soviets did play a major role in defeating Nazism. However, after having defeated the Nazis the Soviet propaganda machine continued to term enemies "fascists."

In November 1958 the First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev, gave a speech about Germany in which he claimed that "the armed forces that are being recreated in Western Germany are again headed by Nazi generals and admirals.

The West German army is being trained in the spirit of the predatory aspirations of the Nazi Wehrmacht, in the spirit of revenge and hatred for the Soviet Union and other peaceable states." He warned that "fascism" was on the rise again.

Throughout the West, those who aligned with the Soviet Union, Marxists or left-wing protesters often accused their enemies of being Nazis. French leader Charles De Gaulle, for instance, was depicted in 1968 as Hitler holding a mask of De Gaulle, the idea being that support for De Gaulle was actually support for a new Hitler hiding behind the French leader.

US President Richard Nixon's White House was confronted with a "heil Nixon" poster emblazoned with a swastika in 1970 during the Vietnam war protests.

All of this rhetoric continued through the end of the Cold War. With the rise of Russia under Vladimir Putin, Moscow has embraced a new kind of nationalism.

However, even though Russia at home has become more right-wing and nationalist, it continues to speak in the language of the far-left abroad, borrowing heavily from the propaganda of the Soviet era.

This Janus-face is part of the program of Moscow. It is all about messaging.

Moscow knows that if it calls its enemies "nazi" enough that the Western media will have to either accept this terminology or debate it. This will leave some people thinking "maybe the Russians have a point" or at least some of them will subconsciously think of "Nazi" when they think of Ukraine.

The New York Times in March explained "why Putin invokes Nazis" and The Guardian noted the "antisemitism animating Putin's claims," in February. NPR noted that Putin's claims to fight "neo-Nazis" was distorting history.

Another reason Moscow believed that its accusations of "Nazi" propaganda would go over well was that for years Russia's media had been pumping out propaganda in English throughout the West. Through channels like RT in various languages and

sites like Sputnik, Russia was pushing various narratives that it thought would cause chaos in the West.

That means that sometimes Russian media would push far-right talking points against migrants or gay rights, but other times it would push far-left “dissidents” in the West, talking up the likes of Noam Chomsky or others.

Russia wanted to be the foil for every opposition party in the West, it hosted members of the far-left and far-right in Moscow. One might think that people would wake up and ask Moscow how it can both embrace far-left narratives and the far-right.

But this dissonance was rarely mentioned. Russia was using the model of Al-Jazeera and TRT, where right-wing regimes will pump out news in English that appears to be on the left.

Thus these right-wing regimes will be for gay rights abroad, or women’s rights, they will support abortion rights in the US and be against “white privilege” and be for gun control or for immigrants and refugees; while at home these regimes believe the diametric opposite of what they push.

Russia was learning how to influence the West. They knew that there are enough people who won’t ask questions and hunger for “alternative” media or “independent” reports that are not part of the “corporate” media in the US. Even if this media is run by Moscow it is still considered “dissidents” and “critical.”

While this makes no sense, because logically media run by authoritarian governments are not “dissidents” or “critical,” nevertheless over the last two decades media such as TRT, RT or Al-Jazeera have become influential. Russia has lost some of that influence after the Ukraine invasion, but it continues to believe its own operatives.

This was one reason Russia believed its narrative about “Nazis” would be successful because it has been successful in the past at peddling these simplistic claims.

However, Russia was also watching how accusing enemies of being “Nazi” is used by western media and western politicians. In the US especially it is common for political discussions to quickly decline into “you’re a Nazi.”

During the Trump era, it was common for the left to accuse the Trump administration of being “white nationalists” or “alt-right” and “nazi.” But these accusations had gone on for years. During the Bush administration, George W. Bush was accused of being a fascist. In the US basically, everyone that is a political enemy is often a “nazi” or “fascist.”

Russia believed that if the West was keyed into these terms then it would accept at face value the claim that Ukraine was “nazi.” Russia had also used these claims in the past about Ukraine, making it seem that its conflict in Ukraine since 2014 was against “nazis.”

The accusation by Russia, as well as critics of the Ukrainian government, was that Ukraine was commemorating “collaborators” from the Nazi occupation of Poland in

the 1940s. This included claims that Ukraine was embracing a far-right nationalist past.

*The Holocaust was used in these discussions and Jews were also forced to be at the center of claims and counter-claims. Books such as *Putin's Hybrid War and the Jews: Antiantisemitism, Propaganda, and the Displacement of Ukrainian Jewry* by Sam Sokol have explored this issue.*

The last aspect of Russia's claims about Ukraine being "Nazis" is that it has sought to use the Holocaust era as part of this talking point. When critics of Putin's invasion noted that Zelensky is Jewish, the reply has now become that Jews worked with the Nazis. This accusation has roots in the West as well.

Accusations of Jewish collaboration go back many decades. Some have used this as an honest exploration of history, noting the difficulty Jews faced living under Nazi control.

Others, however, have often sought to turn this on its head, to use claims of Jews being linked to Nazis as examples of how Jews have become "Judeo Nazis" in Israel, or in the words of one British historian, how Jewish victims of the Holocaust have now victimized Palestinians as part of a circle of history where the abused becomes the abuser.

In this narrative, exploited by anti-Israel extremists, antisemitism, and extremists in the Middle East, Israel and Jews are often compared to Nazis. No other group is so systematically compared to their own persecutors as Jews. This is part of a process in which many feel they can use Jewish history against Jews and Israel.

This twisting of history has been used by British and American politicians, in which Jews are accused of not "learning" from the Holocaust, or not behaving correctly based on their victim status. In short, when Jews do something wrong they are immediately called "Nazis," whereas other minority groups will not be quickly accused of being their own persecutors.

This last aspect of the pernicious claim that Jews are also "Nazis" is part of the latest narrative coming from Moscow. Moscow clearly believes that there are no red lines in terms of this rhetoric. This is a shift from Putin's usual tendency to respect the Jewish community in Russia and also have amicable relations with Israel.

The war with Ukraine has unearthed old ghosts and Russia's tendency to believe its own propaganda about enemies all being "Nazis" has not gone over well. Russia isn't convincing the global south or countries where being a "Nazi" isn't controversial.

Russia's propaganda also isn't convincing Russians, it is primarily designed as slander and to convince a few voices in the West.