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Mass Killing in East Ukraine and the Failure of Liberal Intellectuals

By Joshua Tartakovsky

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The recent events in Ukraine where a war is slowly emerging, do not mean that progressive critics should be silent on these issues. On the contrary, intellectuals should add their voice to pressing concerns, be they the annexation of the Crimea by Russia, the shelling of civilians by the Ukrainian government or US support for toppling an elected president despite the violent actions of neo-fascist groups in Kiev. However, in any instance when intellectuals lend their voice to present day concerns, one would expect they practice some basic norms of behavior. For example, when addressing a conflict and making its existence known to an uninformed audience, one who has intellectual integrity must not omit facts regarding actions taken by an existing government such as the ruthless bombing campaign of fellow citizens that killed over 1,129 civilians so far. One would also expect from intellectuals, not to engage in hate speech or in a categorical stereotyping of a particular ethnic group. Of course, pundits should not be making baseless accusations with no evidence to back these up as such an approach is irresponsible, manipulative and dangerous especially when a real conflict is taking place.

Timothy Garton Ash and Professor Timothy Snyder, the former a writer for the Guardian, known for his political activism in Poland during the Soviet period, and the latter a professor of history at Yale University, not only fail miserably in portraying events in Ukraine accurately but in fact commit the grave errors (if not crimes considering the many human lives already lost) mentioned

above. Both seek to demonize East Ukrainians who are ethnically Russian, while turning a blind eye to the re-emergence of fascism in Kiev and to war crimes committed by the Kiev government against its own civilians. One would expect such behavior from paid propagandists or from closet racists, not from liberal academics and writers.

Following the downing of the Malaysia Airlines plane MH17 in East Ukraine, before an investigation has been even begun, and although it is equally likely that the Ukrainian Government could have possibly carried out the act, Timothy Garton Ash already had all the answers. In his article for the New York Times titled "'Protecting' Russians in Ukraine Has Fatal Consequences", Ash traced the roots of the current crisis in Ukraine to a speech made by Vladimir Putin while serving as a mayor of St. Petersburg in 1994. Ash explains that Putin argued then that the collapse of the USSR left 25 million Russians outside the Russian Federation without protection and that therefore this speech was an indication that Putin will intervene in neighboring countries to protect Russians there, when faced in danger. From this it follows, according to Ash, that it is Putin's alleged actions to aid rebels in East Ukraine that are responsible for the toppling of the jet.

If we are considering rhetoric alone, would it not be appropriate for Ash to mention in this article, not speeches made 25 years ago but that ethnic Russians in East Ukraine today have come under a barrage of racist attacks by the Ukrainian government, with the former prime minister calling them "subhumans" and another leading politician calling for them to be nuked? It is only reasonable to assume that the threats that were directed at ethnic Russians by the Ukrainian government should be considered or at least mentioned, and that people have an inalienable right for protection even if they happen to be ethnically Russian. To make matters worse, Ash mentions nowhere in his article that the Ukrainian government has engaged in a brutal bombing campaign of residential areas in East Ukraine in what it terms an "anti-terror operation" in which over 1,000 civilians have been killed in cold blood. Do these facts not need to be mentioned when seeking to understand the context in which the downing of a plane took place? After all, these are actions are taking place in the present, not in 1994.

In what may amount to false logic in play or outright dishonesty, Ash blames Russia for the downing of the jet while saying at the same breath that there is little evidence for making this accusation. Ash says that "it is not clear who fired it [the missile that downed the passenger jet]", but goes on to say that "it is precisely the ambiguous mixtures created by Mr. Putin's völkisch version of the "responsibility to protect" that produce such disastrous possibilities." Did the plane actually crash or was this a "disastrous possibility"? Ash already knows who is to be blamed: Putin who has "a rather ratlike face". Perhaps Ash has access to confidential information to which only he is privy but it would be nice if he would elaborate on it a bit further.

In addition, Ash's reference of an obscure speech made by Putin as both the prism and evidence by which to understand today's events means that even if Russians are massacred in neighboring countries, as is currently the case in Ukraine where schools, hospitals and churches have been bombed by the Ukrainian army, Russia would not have the right to practice the principle of "responsibility to protect". Apparently, this right can be practiced by the West only. Furthermore, the only time Ash mentions the word "violence" in his article is when referring to ethnic Russians in East Ukraine when he writes disapprovingly of "the violence of their protests". The

heavy shelling of East Ukrainian cities by missiles is apparently not deemed as "violence" by Ash, as it does did not merit a single mention in his article. We are kept then with a mental image of stereotypically angry protesting Russians as the major violence one should be concerned with.

In his essay for the New York Review of Books, titled 'Ukraine, the Edge of Democracy', historian Timothy Snyder praises Ukrainian democracy which of course does not include the referendum practiced by its ethnic Russian citizens. Written before the Ukrainian presidential elections, Snyder praised in his article the upcoming elections, that eventually saw the victory of oligarch Petro Poroshenko, as a marvelous display of democracy, despite Russian federalist rebels' alleged and unproven attempt to disrupt them. Although it was clear that Poroshenko, a major oligarch, is likely to win, Snyder sees these elections as a bright new page in Ukrainian history, while not addressing the obvious question of whether the goal of the Maidan protests were to replace one corrupt politician, Viktor Yanukovich, by another. For him, these elections were an event in which "Ukrainians stand up for their rights". Equally significant is the fact that Snyder mentions nowhere in his essay the referendum that took place in Donetsk and Luhansk in East Ukraine just several days earlier, that received, according to British newspaper The Independent, a 90% turnout. If one is concerned with democracy, as Snyder claims to be, one would expect him to mention as well the popular referendum in which very large masses participated only a few days earlier. Snyder goes on to argue that in the presidential elections, the separatists' "only hope to stop elections is intimidation" while not only failing to prove his accusations but also failing to mention that during the referendum in Donetsk and Luhansk, it was the National Guard of the Ukrainian Government that killed at least one civilian, in a crude attempt intimidate residents from voting. A video of the event makes leaves little room for doubt that random citizens were selected and fired at by Ukrainian forces in order to prevent the referendum from taking place. One should expect at least a mention of these facts, especially when the article is concerned with democracy and the dangers of intimidation yet Snyder apparently deemed these events irrelevant. Snyder wrote that Ukrainian citizens must have elections that are not "imposed by violence" but apparently this does not apply to residents of East Ukraine.

With this in mind, it is not surprising that Snyder said that President Yanukovich "presided over the murder of protesters" while he also disingeniously referred to the Maidan coup as "weeks of peaceful protests". The Telegraph points to growing evidence that hired snipers fired on the protesters, and the violence undertaken by Right Sector at Maidan was raised by congressman Dana Rohrabacher in his questioning of Victoria Nuland at the US Congress. While Snyder claims that "Russian propaganda quite effectively shrouds the real issues by shunning political discussion in favor of fantastic stories about a fascist takeover in Kiev", the fact that extremist elements now form part of the Ukrainian Government, has been confirmed by respected voices such as Anatol Lieven.

For both Ash and Snyder, the rights of ethnic Russians in Ukraine are not an issue despite the fact that the new Ukrainian government has both in words and deeds taken drastic actions against fellow citizens who are ethnically Russian. While for Snyder democracy means voting for a new oligarch, the referendum that took place in East Ukraine despite the violence carried out by the Ukrainian Government, did not receive his attention. For Ash, violence, when it takes place, is practiced by protesting Russians, not by a Ukrainian military bombing civilians. According to

Ash's logic, one can arguably dismiss dangers to Russians in Ukraine today, even when confirmed by the UN and Human Rights Watch, since they may be an outcome of a speech made by Putin several decades ago. However, the plight of ethnic Russians in Ukraine is real and the fact that thousands of refugees fled to Russia rather than Kiev, confirms it. It is the goal of progressive intellectuals to speak out for populations who come under attack, even if they happen to be of Russian ethnicity. Snyder and Ash are doing a disservice not only to their supposed mission as liberal writers concerned about the welfare of others, but also to basic values such as intellectual integrity.