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Western Propaganda for a New Cold War

Western propaganda portrays Russia as the aggressor and NATO as the victim, but the reality looks almost opposite from the ground level, Rick Sterling found on a recent fact-finding trip.

By Rick Sterling

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Recently I went on a 15-day visit to Russia organized by the Center for Citizen Initiatives. The group visited Moscow, the Crimean peninsula, Krasnodar (southern Russia) and St. Petersburg. In each location we met many locals and heard diverse viewpoints.

CCI has a long history promoting friendship and trying to overcome false assumptions between citizens of the USA and Russia. The founder Sharon Tennison has focused on making people-to-people connections including the business community, Rotary clubs, etc. This delegation was organized because of concern about escalating international tensions and the danger of a drift toward world threatening military conflict.

We were in Russia in late June as Russians were commemorating the 75th anniversary of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union. They call it the Great Patriotic War where 27 million Soviet citizens died. In Russia it's a very sober occasion in which they pay tribute to the fallen, acknowledge the heroes and underscore the horrors of war. Virtually everyone in Russia lost family members in World War Two and there seems to be a deep understanding of what war and invasion mean.

It is alarming to see the constant drumbeat in Western media that Russia is “aggressive,” that Russia “invaded” Crimea, Russia is “a threat.” Hardly a day goes by that The New York Times does not have an editorial or news story with the assertion or insinuation that Russia is “aggressive”.

Thursday’s op-ed by Andrew Foxall is an example. A director of the neocon Henry Jackson Society think tank, Foxall bemoans the British departure from the European Union and suggests, without evidence, that Russian President Putin may be behind it:

“Mr. Putin has spent the past 16 years trying to destabilize the West. ... After Brexit, the union has lost not only one of its most capable members, but also one of its two nuclear powers and one of its two seats at the United Nations Security Council. ... Mr. Putin checked the European Union’s expansion when he invaded Ukraine in 2014. The Continent’s security order is now in a perilous plight: If Mr. Putin senses weakness, he will be tempted into further aggression.”

It is now common to hear the claim that Russia “invaded” Ukraine and is “occupying” Crimea. The U.S. and its European allies have imposed sanctions on Russia because of Crimea’s decision – supported by a referendum with nearly 90 percent participation and a 96 percent favorable vote – to separate from Ukraine and rejoin Russia.

Because of the sanctions, tourist cruise ships no longer stop at Crimean ports and international airlines are prohibited from flying directly to the international airport at the Crimean capital, Simferopol. Students from Crimean universities cannot transfer their academic credits to universities internationally.

Despite the sanctions and problems, Crimea appears to be doing reasonably well. In the past two years, the airport has been rebuilt and modernized. The streets of Balaclava, Sevastopol, Simferopol and Yalta are busy and bright. No doubt things could be much better and residents want the sanctions lifted, but there were no evident signs of shortages or poverty.

On the contrary, kids were enjoying ice cream, parks were full and streets busy late into the night. The famous Artek Youth Camp near Yalta is being refurbished with new dormitories, state of the art swimming pool and gymnasium. Right now they are handling 3,000 youth in the camp at one time with 30,000 kids from all over Russia this year.

A 12-mile bridge connecting Crimea to southern Russia is now half complete. A impressive video showing the design is here.

What Provoked Crimea?

After 22 years as part of independent Ukraine following the breakup of the Soviet Union, what drove the people of Crimea to overwhelmingly support a referendum calling for “re-unification” with Russia? Was this the result of intimidation or an “occupation” by Russia?

We received a very strong sense from talking with many different people in Crimea that they are happy with their decision. The impetus was not aggression from Russia; the impetus came from

the violence and ultra-nationalism of the foreign-backed coup in Ukraine overthrowing the democratically elected President Viktor Yanukovich, who was strongly supported by Crimea's voters.

U.S.-supported protests against Ukraine's Yanukovich government began in November 2013 in the "Maidan" (central square) in Kiev. Protesters included right-wing nationalist and Nazi sympathizers hostile to the Yanukovich government. A significant faction in the Maidan glorified the Ukrainian Nazi collaborator Stepan Bandera.

The U.S. was deeply involved in promoting the "Maidan" protests and strategizing how to bring a new government to power. Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland demanded the Yanukovich government do nothing to stop or prevent the increasing vandalism, attacks and intimidation. With thugs in the street increasingly clashing with police, U.S. officials pressed the Ukrainian government to break economic ties with Russia as a condition for closer relations with Europe and loans from the International Monetary Fund.

On the surface, the U.S. was encouraging Ukraine to strengthen ties with the European Union but in reality Nuland's goals were about expanding NATO and undermining Russia. This was dramatically revealed in a secretly recorded phone call between Nuland and the U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine, Geoffrey Pyatt.

Nuland and Pyatt discussed who should and should not be in the coup government two weeks before the coup happened. As they conspired over the phone, Nuland expressed her displeasure with the European Union's reluctance to push the coup. "Fuck the E.U.," Nuland said.

When the audio recording of Nuland and Pyatt discussing how to "midwife" the Kiev coup was revealed, the State Department's spokesperson was grilled about it. She responded "That's what diplomats do."

Six weeks before the phone call – at a conference of U.S.-Ukrainian business leaders sponsored by Chevron – Nuland spoke glowingly of Ukraine's "European aspirations" and the U.S. investment in promoting "democracy" in Ukraine.

In that Dec. 13, 2013 speech, Nuland said "Since Ukraine's independence in 1991 the United States has supported Ukrainians as they build democratic skills and institutions, as they promote civic participation and good governance, all of which are preconditions for Ukraine to achieve its European aspirations. We have invested over \$5 billion to assist Ukraine in these and other goals." (approximately 7:30 into the recording of the U.S.-Ukraine Foundation conference).

In mid-December 2013, hundreds of Crimeans traveled to Kiev in buses to join peaceful protests in opposition to the Maidan protests seen on television. They stayed in Kiev through January and into February until the violence exploded on Feb. 18, 2014. Altogether, 82 persons were killed including 13 police and 1,100 injured.

At that point, the Crimeans decided peaceful protest was useless and to return home. The bus caravan departed Kiev on Feb 20 but was stopped at night near the town of Korsun. The buses

were torched and the Crimean travelers brutalized, beaten and seven killed. When news of this reached Crimea, it was yet another cause for alarm.

A video titled “The Crimes of Euromaidan Nazis” documents the events and includes interviews with numerous passengers. These atrocities against unarmed Crimeans were committed on a public highway with no intervention from local Ukrainian police.

Rejecting Compromise

On Feb 21, the Yanukovich reached a compromise brokered by three European governments, calling for reduced presidential powers and early elections so Ukrainians would have the opportunity to elect a new leader. But those concessions did not appease the most violent Maidan protesters or their supporters. A parliamentarian was beaten in broad daylight and threats issued.

President Yanukovich fled for his life and a new government, led by Victoria Nuland’s choice Arseniy Yatsenyuk, took charge. The U.S. and its Western allies quickly recognized the new government as “legitimate” while Russia objected to it as an illegal coup. In the first days of the new government, a bill was passed to make Ukrainian the sole official language of the country despite the fact that many Ukrainians speak Russian.

Indeed, there was aggression and violence in Ukraine but it was not from Russia. Rather, the evidence shows that the violence was instigated by the forces that led the coup. This was revealed in an intercepted phone conversation between British representative to the European Union, Catherine Ashton, and the Estonian Foreign Minister, Urmas Paet.

Paet reported that he had been to Kiev and “there is a stronger and stronger understanding that behind snipers it was not Yanukovich, it was somebody from the new coalition.” Ashton responded, “Oh gosh We will need to look into that” and quickly moved on. Nearly 2½ years later, the post-coup regime in Kiev has failed to conduct a serious investigation into the sniper attacks.

While this history is largely ignored by the U.S. and Western media – The New York Times won’t even admit that there was a “coup” – the reality is well known in Crimea and other ethnic Russian areas of Ukraine. Crimeans whom we spoke with described their shock and outrage at the events that unfolded in the winter of 2013-14.

In just four months they witnessed violent Maidan protests, the overthrow of the elected government, beatings and killings of citizens returning from Kiev, and then a parliamentary vote to remove Russian as an official language.

In response, local leaders recommended a Crimea wide referendum with the option to officially re-unite with the country that Crimea had been part of for over two centuries. A referendum was held on March 16. Turnout was 89 percent with 96 percent voting in favor of the “reunification of Crimea with Russia.”

With the violent overthrow of the Kiev government and clear proof of U.S. involvement in the coup, it seems highly inaccurate to say that Russia “invaded” or is “occupying” Crimea. (Russian troops were already stationed in Crimea as part of the lease agreement for the Sevastopol naval base.) On the contrary, it seems to be the U.S. and its allies were the “aggressive” ones.

The same reversal of reality is going on with the expansion of NATO. In recent weeks, NATO has placed armed forces in Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania while complaining about Russia engaging in threatening military deployments *inside* Russia.

NATO military expenses are already 13 times greater than that of Russia yet NATO plans to increase military spending even more. Meanwhile the U.S. unilaterally withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in 2002 and is busy building and installing ABM sites in Alaska and now Eastern Europe. With a serious face, U.S. officials have previously claimed these sites are being installed because of the danger of “Iranian missiles” but only a fool could take that seriously.

There is the additional risk that the same sites could be converted from anti-ballistic missiles to contain nuclear warheads.

Are NATO and the U.S. preparing for war? The public should be asking hard questions to our political and military leaders as they waste our tax dollars and risk global conflagration. And, enough of the nonsense about Russian “aggression” when the evidence indicates it’s the U.S. and its allies that are destabilizing other countries, escalating a new arms race and promoting conflict instead of diplomacy.