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Ukrainian parliament approves anti-Russian law to “decolonize” place names

In late March, Ukraine’s parliament passed a law banning the use of geographic names associated with Russia and Russian history. The law claims that such names “symbolize an occupier state or its notable, memorable, historical and cultural places and figures that carried out military aggression.”

First introduced in April of last year, the law’s passage will pave the way for the further erasure of not just the Russian language and culture from Ukrainian society, but more broadly of historical knowledge and truth as well. The complex history of Ukraine, which in the 20th century was inextricably tied to the history of the October revolution, is being replaced with the historical myths of far-right Ukrainian nationalism.

As a synopsis of the law states, it “is aimed at decolonizing toponymy and streamlining the use of geographical names in populated areas of Ukraine (...) With the aim of fully restoring Ukrainian historical and national toponymy, modernizing it with the names of the newest Heroes in the fight against the enemy.”

The law does not state what “Heroes” the law’s authors have in mind. But there is no question that figures from the country’s various far-right paramilitary formations such as the Azov Battalion and the Right Sector will now have even more streets, squares and monuments all named in their honor.

This process of the renaming of streets and the erection of monuments in honor of fascists and Nazi collaborators is already underway. Last October, a street in Kiev named after Soviet Marshal Rodion Malinovsky was renamed after the Azov Battalion, an organization which openly espouses neo-Nazism and sports fascist symbols. Both members of the Kiev

City Council and Azov's founder Andriy Biletsky were present at the renaming ceremony.

Malinovsky, who was ethnically Ukrainian, played a key role in both defeating Nazi Germany at Stalingrad and liberating much of southern Ukraine from the horrors of Nazi rule from 1943-1944.

In contrast, the founder of Azov Biletsky declared in 2010 that the Ukrainian nation's mission was to "lead the white races of the world in a final crusade ... against Semite-led Untermenschen [subhumans]."

More recently, Kiev's City Council announced plans to rename Lev Tolstoy Square to the "Square of Ukrainian Heroes." Another proposed change would see Lev Tolstoy Street become Hetman Pavlo Skoropadskyi Street, who briefly led the anti-Bolshevik Ukrainian State in 1918 as a puppet of German imperialism.

Earlier in 2016, Kiev's City Council controversially renamed Moscow Avenue after Stepan Bandera, the infamous Nazi collaborator whose Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists participated in the massacre of hundreds of thousands of Jews and Poles during World War II.

While the process of "decommunization"—a euphemism for the systematic erasure of socialist symbols, names, monuments and history—began in Ukraine following the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the "derussification" campaign was for a long time largely limited to Western Ukrainian cities and villages where right-wing nationalists held political power locally and was not part of official government policy.

However, following the 2014 US and EU backed coup that removed elected President Viktor Yanukovich and installed a right-wing nationalist, pro-NATO government, the processes of derussification and decommunization rapidly accelerated with the terms becoming almost synonymous. Since 2014 in Kiev alone, approximately 500 streets have been renamed.

Such processes were used to bolster the rapid build-up of Ukraine's military to prepare for war and the decoupling of the Ukrainian economy from its longtime political and economic ally, Russia.

The authors of the current anti-Russian law use fascistic language to claim that de-Russification and decolonization are "equal to the self-preservation of the nation."

"Today, this process is gaining considerable relevance and importance, because in the relations between Ukraine and Russia, which has been carrying out armed aggression

against our independent state for more than 8 years in a row, a new civilizational and political-ideological reality has emerged,” the lawmakers state.

According to Fyodor Venislavsky, a parliamentary member of President Volodymyr Zelensky’s Servant of the People political party, any reminder of the close link between Ukraine’s history and that of Russia or the Soviet Union will be stricken from Ukraine within six months.

“I think that in the near future, within half a year, we will get rid of any ties with the former Soviet, Russian and modern Russia,” Venislavsky stated in an interview on Ukraine’s Rada television station.

The law is also intended to overrule democratic local authority, permitting individuals to sue local governments if they suspect that Russian-associated names are being allowed to remain in place, according to Venislavsky. In southern and eastern regions of Ukraine where Russian is the predominant language, such laws will undoubtedly empower individual far-right nationalists over local governments.

Unsurprisingly, the reactionary legislation was lauded by the far-right Volodymyr Viatrovych, the former Director of the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory and current parliament member. Viatrovych said that the law “marked a decisive step on the path towards cleansing Ukraine of all marks of the ‘Russian world’ and the full decolonization of our public spaces.” According to Viatrovych, the current law “is no less important than the law on decommunization passed in 2015,” that banned communist symbols and prohibited the Communist Party of Ukraine from participating in elections.

By 2016, Ukraine had renamed 51,493 streets and 987 cities and villages and removed 1,320 monuments to Lenin and 1,069 monuments to other communist leaders and figures, according to Viatrovych’s Ukrainian Institute of National Memory.

Viatrovych has previously served as the director of Ukraine’s Security Service (SBU) archives, while simultaneously working as the head of an OUN-B front organization, the Center for the Study of the Liberation Movement. He has publicly glorified the figurehead of Ukrainian fascism, Stepan Bandera, and his Nazi collaborators from the OUN-B as martyrs and heroes.

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