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In the service of imperialism: Right-wing “intellectuals” gather in Kiev

By David North

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A group of right-wing academics, journalists, pro-war human-rights activists, and specialists in “discourse” is gathering in Kiev this coming weekend (May 16–19). The purpose of the meeting—headed by Professor Timothy Snyder of Yale University and Leon Wieseltier, the neo-con literary editor of the *New Republic*—is to bestow political and moral respectability on the Ukrainian regime that came to power in February, through a putsch financed and directed by the United States and Germany.

Promoting themselves as an “international group of intellectuals,” the organizers have issued a publicity handout—excuse me, a “Manifesto”—in which the meeting is described as “an encounter between those who care about freedom and a country where freedom is *dearly* won.” There is some truth in this statement, as the overthrow of the Yanukovich government did, in fact, cost the United States a great deal of money.

The meeting is an exercise in imperialist propaganda. Its sponsors include the embassies of Canada, France, Germany, Poland and the United States. Other sponsors include the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry, the European Endowment for Democracy, and *Eurozine*. On the *Eurozine* web

site, which is heavily promoting the Kiev meeting, there are numerous postings relating to the geostrategic implications of the Ukrainian coup. Prominently featured are articles such as “How to Win Cold War II.” Its author, Vladislav Inozemtsev, is presently a visiting fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, DC.

Back in the 1960s, intellectuals who had participated in the Cold War’s anti-communist Congress for Cultural Freedom were somewhat chagrined when the operations of that organization were publicly linked to the machinations of the Central Intelligence Agency. In those days, to be seen collaborating with the CIA and other state intelligence agencies was considered harmful to one’s intellectual and moral reputation. *Tempi passati!* The participants of the Kiev assembly are entirely unabashed by the obvious fact that they are part of an event endorsed and stage managed by governments that were heavily involved in the overthrow of the Yanukovych government.

The entire assembly is an exercise in fraud and duplicity. The rhetoric of democratic “discourse” provides a cover for the elaboration of a thoroughly reactionary political agenda. Every phrase must be decrypted.

The Manifesto asserts that the assembly will “carry out a broad public discussion about the meaning of Ukrainian pluralism for the future of Europe, Russia and the World.” What this actually means, when decrypted, is that the assembly will examine how the Ukrainian putsch can serve as a model for further operations aimed at undermining Russia’s influence in Europe and Eurasia.

Other questions that will be addressed at the meeting are:

1. “How can human rights be grounded and how are we motivated by the idea of human rights?” [Decrypted: “How can the human rights ‘discourse’ provide a pretext for political destabilization and the overthrow of opponent regimes?”]
2. “How and when does language provide access to the universal, and how and when does it define political difference?” [Decrypted: “How can democratic jargon be employed to obfuscate the material interests underlying social conflict?”]
3. “How is decency in politics possible amidst international anarchy, domestic corruption, and the general fallibility of individuals?” [Decrypted: “Why the realities of contemporary geopolitics justify the ‘transgression of boundaries,’ i.e., the use of torture, targeted assassinations, authoritarianism, war, etc.”]

Dwelling on these questions will allow the discussants to exhale a great deal of hot air while keeping the expenditure of intellectual energy to a minimum. Not listed among the subjects to be raised are questions arising from the Kiev regime’s acts of repression against people in southern

and eastern Ukraine, which have resulted in scores, if not hundreds, of deaths. Nor do the organizers plan to examine and explain the prominent role played by the neo-fascist forces of Svoboda and Right Sector in February's putsch and the organization of the present government.

The most prominent of the participants are a hastily gathered collection of "usual suspects," i.e., individuals who have a well-established record of promoting imperialist interventions under the false flag of human rights. They specialize in the moral marketing of state policies that are of an essentially criminal character. In one form or another, the invocation of "human rights" has always served as a means of legitimizing imperialism. Even Belgium's King Leopold, as he murdered millions in the Congo in the 1880s, claimed to be acting on behalf of the "moral and material regeneration" of his helpless victims. More than a century ago, John Hobson, one of the first great scholars of imperialism, called attention to the insidious role played by the hypocritical use of moral pretenses to conceal the real motives underlying imperialist policy. He wrote:

It is precisely in this falsification of the real import of motives that the greatest vice and the most signal peril of imperialism reside. When, out of a medley of mixed motives, the least potent [i.e., "human rights" and/or "democracy"] is selected for public prominence because it is the most presentable, when issues of a policy which was not present at all to the minds of those who formed this policy are treated as chief causes, the moral currency of the nation is debased. The whole policy of Imperialism is riddled with this deception. [*Imperialism: A Study* (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 209–10]

The participants include Leon Wieseltier, who served as a leading member of the Committee for the Liberation of Iraq and is closely identified with the Project for the New American Century. Paul Berman, a liberal political theorist, advocated the US bombing of Serbia (in support of Kosovar separatism) and, in the aftermath of 9/11, sought to justify US wars in the Middle East and Central Asia as a struggle against Islamic fascism. Berman's Sunday evening lecture, entitled "Alexis de Tocqueville and the Idea of Democracy" will, no doubt, be an eye-opener for Oleh Tyahnybok and his followers in the Svoboda Party.

Bernard Kouchner will, inevitably, be present. Associated many decades ago with Doctors without Borders [*Médecins Sans Frontières*], Kouchner broke with this organization over tactical issues and formed Doctors of the World [*Médecins du Monde*] to advocate a more robust program of "humanitarian interventionism." This platform, as Hobson would have foreseen, sanctioned innumerable pretexts for military intervention in one or another country. Kouchner promoted the intervention in the Balkans. He eventually became foreign minister in the government of French President Sarkozy. In 2011, after having left the cabinet, he supported Sarkozy's attack on Libya, as well as the French invasion of the Ivory Coast. This political reactionary and defender of the French capitalist state will participate in a panel discussion of the question: "Does Europe Need [a] Ukrainian revolution?"

Kouchner's compatriot, the celebrity philosopher Bernard-Henri Levy, another supporter of humanitarian interventions, is scheduled to give a speech denouncing Russian President Vladimir Putin. It is entitled "The resistible rise of d'Arturo Poutine." This sophomoric misuse of the title of Berthold Brecht's deadly-serious theatrical allegory [*The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*] is characteristic of Levy's work. Levy can denounce Putin without fear of retaliation. It would take a good deal more guts—at any rate, more than Levy has—to denounce the crimes of Obama. Brecht's work was a biting satire on the rise of Hitler to power. Significantly, Brecht set his allegory in Chicago, drawing parallels between the operations of the criminal underworld in a capitalist environment to the workings of the Nazi Party. Among the most chilling lines, which were intended to resonate with an American audience: "Do not rejoice in his defeat, you men. For though the world has stood up and stopped the bastard, the bitch that bore him is in heat again." Old Brecht's warning has acquired a new timeliness.

Levy's reputation in France as a public intellectual is in tatters. In 2010, he published an essay attacking Kant and the Enlightenment. He based this anti-Kant diatribe on the works of one "Jean-Baptiste Botul," a philosopher whose work had come to Levy's attention. Unfortunately, Levy overlooked the fact that "Botul" and his system of thought ("Botulisme") were the wholly fictional creation of a French journalist, Frédéric Pagès. Now an object of derision, one Gallic wit summed up the philosophy of the impressively coifed Levy with the phrase: "God is dead, but my hair is perfect." [For those who wish to learn all they would ever need to know about the thought of BHL, as he is widely known, his *Wikipedia* entry provides a concise summary.]

While Levy represents the somewhat comic side of the proceedings, Professor Timothy Snyder's presence, and leading role, is of a darker character. His rapid and spectacular rise to public prominence is entirely bound up with his relentless efforts to provide an ostensibly scholarly justification for US attempts to draw Ukraine into its sphere of influence, *and* to stigmatize Russia as the archenemy of the humane democratic aspirations championed, according to Snyder, by the United States and Europe.

The book that launched Snyder into the stratosphere of academic celebrity is entitled *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*. Published in 2010, the book was greeted in the popular media as the work of a master. There were reviews in countless newspapers, where Snyder was hailed as if he were Thucydides incarnate. Snyder, it seems, enjoyed the attention. In the 2012 paperback edition of his book, the first 14 pages are devoted entirely to quoting excerpts from reviews that sang his praise.

Why all the fuss? Snyder's book appeared in the aftermath of the 2004–2005 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, which resulted—after mass protests over allegations of vote fraud by supporters of Viktor Yanukovich—in the accession of US-backed Viktor Yushchenko to the Ukrainian presidency. In order to consolidate his hold on power, Yushchenko sought to appeal to right-wing Ukrainian chauvinism. A key element of this campaign, designed to whip up anti-Russian

sentiments, was the presentation of Soviet collectivization in the 1930s, which led to catastrophic famine and approximately 3.5 million deaths, as the equivalent of the systematic extermination of European Jewry by the Nazis. The *Holodomor* (death by hunger), he claimed, was a form of genocide planned and carried out by the Soviet Union against Ukrainians, just as the *Holocaust* was the deliberate mass murder of the Jews.

Independent of the legitimacy of this interpretation—which, to the say the least, is from both a factual and theoretical standpoint, highly dubious—the elevation of the Holodomor into a symbol of Ukraine’s victimization by the Soviet Union (and Russia) was politically inflammatory and, therefore, highly useful. It provided the Ukrainian right with a potent myth, and US imperialism with a propaganda club that could be employed to fan the flames of anti-Russian sentiment.

Yushchenko was voted out of office in 2010. However, in one of his final acts, he proclaimed Stepan Bandera (1909–1959)—the notorious Ukrainian nationalist and fascist who had collaborated with the Third Reich and participated in the mass murder of Jews and Poles—a “Hero of Ukraine.” This evoked widespread protests, including from the chief rabbi of Ukraine. Curiously, in light of his subsequent writings, Timothy Snyder was among those who issued a protest. In an article published in the February 24, 2010 edition of the *New York Review of Books*, he questioned Yushchenko’s action. Snyder provided a concise summary of the crimes of Bandera and the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN-B) that he headed:

The Germans did destroy Poland in 1939, as the Ukrainian nationalists had hoped; and they tried to destroy the Soviet Union in 1941. When the Wehrmacht invaded the Soviet Union that June, they were joined by the armies of Hungary, Romania, Italy, and Slovakia, as well as small contingents of Ukrainian volunteers associated with the OUN-B. Some of these Ukrainian nationalists helped the Germans organize murderous pogroms of Jews. In so doing, they were advancing a German policy, but one that was consistent with their own program of ethnic purity, and their own identification of Jews with Soviet tyranny.

Snyder described the actions of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), which operated under the command of the OUN-B:

Under their command, the UPA undertook to ethnically cleanse western Ukraine of Poles in 1943 and 1944. UPA partisans murdered tens of thousands of Poles, most of them women and children. Some Jews who had taken shelter with Polish families were also killed. Poles (and a few surviving Jews) fled the countryside, controlled by the UPA, to the towns, controlled by the Germans.

In the aftermath of the Nazi surrender, the Soviet Union and Poland (now ruled by a Stalinist party) were confronted with continued resistance from the OUN, which received support from the United States. Thousands died in the course of the fighting that continued into the 1950s. The

Soviet Union and Poland referred to the OUN as “German-Ukrainian fascists,” which, Snyder conceded, was “a characterization accurate enough to serve as enduring and effective propaganda both within and without the Soviet Union.” As for Bandera, Snyder noted that: “He remained faithful to the idea of a fascist Ukraine until assassinated by the KGB [Soviet secret police] in 1959.”

Commenting on the relationship between the celebration of Bandera and Ukrainian politics, Snyder wrote:

Yushchenko was soundly defeated in the first round of the presidential elections, *perhaps in some measure because far more Ukrainians identify with the Red Army than with nationalist partisans from western Ukraine*. Bandera was burned in effigy in Odessa after he was named a hero; even his statue in west Ukrainian Lviv, erected by city authorities in 2007, was under guard during the election campaign. [Emphasis added]

Concluding his historical essay, Snyder wrote: “In embracing Bandera as he leaves office, Yushchenko has cast a shadow over his own political legacy.”

When Snyder wrote this essay, published in early 2010, he evidently considered Bandera and the OUN to be an important, dangerous and disturbing element of Ukrainian history. However, by the time *Bloodlands* was published eight months later, in October 2010, Snyder’s treatment of this subject had undergone an extraordinary and radical change. In his 524-page book, the operations of the Ukrainian nationalists received the most cursory mention. The index of *Bloodlands* does not contain even a single entry for either Stepan Bandera or the OUN! The entire book devotes just one sentence, on page 326, to the murderous activities of the UPA, commanded by the OUN.

It is obvious that in the course of 2010, as final preparations were being made for the publication of *Bloodlands*, Snyder—most likely in consultation with his editors at Basic Books—decided that references to the crimes of the Ukrainian nationalists should be kept out of the book. None of the facts and issues relating to Ukrainian fascism raised by Snyder in his February 2010 essay in the *New York Review of Books* was to find expression in *Bloodlands*.

In its published form, *Bloodlands* is a transparently dishonest exercise in right-wing historical revisionism. That is, it is an endorsement of the Holodomor narrative, in which the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany are presented as political and moral equivalents, with the strongly suggested implication that the Soviet Union was probably worse. There is no examination of the historical origins, socioeconomic foundations, and political objectives of the two regimes. The complex historical and political issues that must be addressed in any serious study of collectivization are simply ignored. The catastrophe produced by the reckless implementation of collectivization is “explained” with the assertion that “Stalin chose to kill millions of people in Soviet Ukraine.”

In contrast to the popular media, there have been damning reviews of Snyder's book by serious historians. His efforts to minimize the extent of the atrocities carried out by Ukrainian nationalists have raised concerns. Professor Omer Bartov of Brown University notes:

The vast massacres of Jews by their Ukrainian neighbors throughout eastern Poland at that time [summer 1941] receive scant attention and are swiftly related to prior Soviet crimes. Snyder's attempts to explain why Ukrainians butchered their Jewish neighbors, joined the German-controlled police, enrolled in the SS, or served as extermination camp personnel seem quite feeble in view of the violence these men perpetrated.

Bartov objects to Snyder's efforts to equate the violence of Soviet resistance to the violence employed by the Nazi invaders.

By equating partisans and occupiers, Soviet and Nazi occupation, Wehrmacht and Red Army criminality, and evading interethnic violence, Snyder drains the war of much of its moral content and inadvertently adopts the apologists' argument that where everyone is a criminal no one can be blamed. [*Slavic Review*, Summer 2011]

The historian Mark Mazower presents a devastating criticism of Snyder's work: "One can certainly make too much of the importance of East European anti-Semitism—and not a few scholars can be criticized for this—but one can also make too little, and Snyder's treatment here veers in that direction." [*Contemporary European History*, May 2012]

In light of Snyder's subsequent evolution, it is difficult to explain *Bloodland's* evasion of the crimes of Ukrainian nationalism as anything other than a politically motivated decision related to the political operations of the United States in Ukraine and Snyder's own increasingly intense involvement in their implementation. During the past several months, Snyder has emerged as one of the most prominent defenders of the Kiev regime. The most striking characteristics of his writings and speeches have been their venomous hostility to Russia and their furious denials of any significant radical right-wing involvement in the February coup and the political physiognomy of the Kiev regime.

In his most recent defense of the Kiev regime, published in Wieseltier's *New Republic*, Snyder sinks to new depths of intellectual dishonesty. Russia and even the Soviet Union are presented as quasi-fascist regimes. The major role of Svoboda and Right Sector in the political life of Ukraine is ignored. It is in Russia's opposition to the new Ukrainian regime, Snyder claims, that the rising tide of fascism finds expression.

In one of the more bizarre passages, Snyder declares: "Fascism means the celebration of the nude male form, the obsession with homosexuality, simultaneously criminalized and imitated. ... Today, these ideas are on the rise in Russia ..." It is impossible that Snyder is unaware that Svoboda is virulently hostile to homosexuality, and that it disrupted a gay rights rally in 2012,

which it denounced publicly as “a Sabbath of 50 perverts.” [Cited in the *Wikipedia* entry on Svoboda]

In accordance with his political agenda, Snyder brazenly falsifies history. In direct contrast to what he wrote four years ago, he now states that: “The political collaboration and the uprising of Ukrainian nationalists were, all in all, a minor element in the history of the German occupation.”

In the writings of Timothy Snyder we are confronted with an intellectually unhealthy and dangerous tendency: the *obliteration* of the distinction between the writing of history and the manufacturing of propaganda in the service of the state. All the “intellectuals” who will assemble in Kiev this weekend are personifications of this profoundly reactionary process.