

Necks and Nostrils: The Murderous Folly of the New Cold War

Written by John Hallam

Tuesday, 24 February 2015 14:59 - Last Updated Friday, 13 March 2015 02:25

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(UPDATED BELOW)

Let's be clear about this. The Putin regime is odious. What it is doing to the Russian people -- the degradation of their liberties; the imposition of Tea Party-style willful ignorance, false piety and bellicose nationalism on the culture; the crippling corruption of its klepto-capitalism (which almost, but not quite, approaches the level in the US and UK, where trillions of dollars have been transferred from working people to a tiny sliver of politically connected elites on Wall Street); its brutal prison system (which, while rivalling the American gulag in its harshness, lags far behind it in the proportion of citizens it imprisons and the racial disparities of the captive population) -- all of this is insupportable. I hold no brief for the oft-seen stance that soft-pedals the Putin regime's domestic depredations in order to play up the egregious sins of America's foreign policy. You don't have to do that in order to condemn the murderous poltroonery of the Potomac imperialists, any more than you had to pretend that Saddam Hussein was an enlightened statesman in order to condemn America's Nazi-like military aggression to destroy his regime.

But as Patrick Smith notes in a recent column, America's media and political elites are colluding to obscure the realities of the most volatile and dangerous situation in world politics today: Washington's insane drive to destroy the Russian economy and force "regime change" in the Kremlin.

As Smith reports, Americans -- and to barely lesser degree, the Brits -- are being sold an extremely fetid bill of goods in regard to the New Cold War in general, and the situation in Ukraine in particular. One major aspect of this snow job is the fierce -- not to say hysterical -- dismissal in the West of any idea that repulsive neo-fascists factions played a decisive role in the final overthrow of the previous government and are playing a leading role in many aspects of Ukrainian policy today, particularly in the war against Russian-leaning eastern Ukraine. (And again, you don't have to pretend that the pro-Russian separatists are all noble freedom fighters free of any ideological taint or criminal activity in order to criticize

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the sinister nature of the neo-fascist militants now in ascendancy in Ukraine.) As Smith points out, any Western media references to the neo-fascists in Ukraine -- most of whom are proud to publicly proclaim their association with right-wing extremism, even national socialism-- are always put in quotes, e.g., "the so-called 'neo-fascist' groups," etc. Their point, of course, is that only conspiracy-theory nuts and Kremlin apologists would use such terminology to label these very important factions in the new Washington-backed (and Washington-picked) Ukrainian government. Smith writes:

It has been more or less evident for some time that extreme-right nationalists have been key to Kiev's military strategy as an advance guard and as shock troops in the streets of eastern Ukraine's cities. Here is a Facebook entry posted the other day on Voice of Ukraine by Right Sector USA, which reps for said right-wing group in the States:

“As promised, here's the news you are probably aware of by now—the combat has moved into Donetsk. The Right Sector and the 93rd Mechanized Brigade have wedged themselves into the city and continue to fight. Separatists are suffering heavy losses and keep running away. Despite this, the support is still needed, so we need you to share [this info] for maximum resonance and forcing the authorities to act immediately.... Please offer your support by sharing and sending prayers to our heroes! Glory to Ukraine!”

Horse's mouth. And there is worse from the same source. Considering the cynical American role in creating and now worsening the Ukraine crisis, the following is a source of shame.

On New Year's Day members of Svoboda, the extreme-right party that many neo-Nazis count their political home, held a candle-lit parade through Kiev to mark the 106th anniversary of Stepan Bandera's birth. Bandera was the Jew-hating, Russian-hating, Pole-hating Third Reich collaborator, assassin and terrorist now honored as an icon of Ukrainian nationalism.

Look at the video, provided by Liveleak. Listen to the crazed chanting. Czech President Milos Zeman did, and the images reminded him of similar scenes during Hitler's occupation of Czechoslovakia. Here is what Zeman said: “There is something wrong with Ukraine.”

Here is what the E.U. said: Nothing.
Here is what the State Department said: Nothing.
Here is what the American press reported: Nothing.

There is yet more, per usual with this bunch in Kiev. The day after

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the neo-Nazi parade Liveleak posted a video, with transcript, of a lengthy interview Channel 5 TV in Kiev conducted with a Ukrainian soldier. Poroshenko owned the station until he became president last year.

The station did the interview but killed it: "This interview was not aired, because the Ukrainian Government decided that it wasn't appropriate for their purposes." This is to put it mildly.

Forget about neo- or crypto- or any of that. This "trooper," as the transcript unfortunately calls this man, is a right-in-the-open Nazi, worse than the most committed skeptic might have conjured. Ukraine is even better than Europe: "Only gays, transvestites and other degenerates live there." Then: "When we have liberated Ukraine, we will go to Europe under our banners and revive all national socialist organizations there."

All sorts of talk about "the purification of the nation," a phrase Hitler liked, "a strong state," who can stay in Ukraine and who must go. Now comes repellent language, readers, but we should all know of it:

"First of all, we ought to oust, and if they do not wish to leave, then cut the throats of all of the Muscovites, or kikes—we will exterminate all of them. Our principle is 'One God, one country, one nation'"—this also from Hitler. "As far as the current government is concerned, can you see that they are the same scum? Poroshenko is a kike...."

The blood boils. And it boils over with the haunting knowledge that American officials support these people. Beyond the sewer consciousness and language, there is the apparent danger: These people have the Kiev government backed into a corner, unable to behave responsibly.

Smith notes that pressure from these armed and violent extremists is one reason Ukrainian officials suddenly and peremptorily broke off peace negotiations last week and instead launched a new full-blown assault on the rebellious regions.

Another reason for the return to violence is, as Smith notes, the destruction of the Ukrainian economy -- and the vast degradation of the lives and hopes of the Ukrainian people -- by the harsh austerity demanded by the enlightened West. The yearning to escape the orbit of the Kremlin and turn toward the West was one of the driving forces of the original Maidan protest movement; many Ukrainians wanted the kind of freedom, prosperity and economic opportunity they saw in the West.

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(Or in increasingly smaller pockets of Western society.) It was these understandable yearnings that were seized upon by our Great Gamesters in the State Department, our corporate oligarchs seeking new fields for profitable exploitation, and by oligarchic and neo-fascist forces in Ukraine who saw the opportunity for gaining power.

But what has been the reality of the successful turn to the West? What has it brought Ukrainians? Utter ruin, as Smith reports (*italics are mine*):

The news coming from Kiev starts to make Greece look like the Klondike. The economy shrank 7.5 percent last year and will recede at least as much this. No one knows. It could shrink as much as 10 percent. Here is what Roland Hinterkoerner, a thoughtful analyst at RBS Asia-Pacific, the Royal Bank of Scotland's Hong Kong outpost, had to say about Ukraine in a recent economic report:

"The country is clinically dead.... There is nothing government or the central bank can do to stop the decline. The population is being pushed further and further into poverty. Food prices are up 25 percent and rent, electricity, gas and water by 34 percent.... This is the picture of a Ukraine that is looking an economic collapse in the eye. But its government is still attempting to channel money into the military to fend off the big bear's aggression.... The danger for Ukraine is not Russia. It is its own demise...."

Bloomberg published an interesting report earlier this month on Ukraine's external position ... The news in it is that Ukraine's 2017 bond is now selling at 58 cents, down from par (\$1) a year ago. Translation: The markets are now pricing in an across-the-board default. ... Further tranches of the IMF's \$17 billion bailout, launched last April, are now blocked until Kiev makes more and very deep cuts in public spending.

O.K., \$17 billion from the IMF, once the government savages its budget. Against this, Kiev has payments of \$10 billion in debt service alone due this year—that is interest, not principal. With principal, Bloomberg puts the figure at \$14 billion, and an additional \$10 billion is due next year. It is not clear it can cover these payments even with the IMF funds.

Do you see what is going on here? The IMF's bailout is not marked for Ukrainian social services or any other benefit to the citizenry. All that is about to be taken away, in the neoliberal style. The bailout money goes to Kiev and back out again to the Western financial institutions holding Ukrainian debt. In effect, debt held by

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private-sector creditors is transferred to the IMF, which uses it to leverage Ukraine into a free-market model via its standard conditionality: No austerity, no dough.

Now you know why the new finance minister in Kiev is an American apparatchik with long experience in the Hillary-era State Department. Now you know what Washington means when it uses the words “democracy” and “freedom.”

Once again, we see tragic confirmation of the true aims of American foreign policy. Those aims are not and have never been the welfare, freedom and prosperity of the the people it purports to “help”; by its interventions and machinations. Washington does not care -- in the slightest, for even a second -- what actually happens to the actual human beings living in Ukraine (or Russia or Iraq or Syria or Libya or Egypt or Yemen -- or even in America, whose citizens have been bankrupted, repressed and made targets for blowback from their leaders' reckless violence and destabilization overseas.) All that matters is that the interests of the dominating elite are advanced. All that matters is that American-backed satraps -- or, in the case of Ukraine, an actual American citizen, former State Department staffer Natalie Jurasko, who had to be hastily awarded Ukrainian citizenship before taking over the nation's finances -- are put in power. All that matters is that foreign governments bleed their own people dry in order to enrich Western financial elites (who are, of course, busy bleeding their own people dry). All that matters is that legacy insiders like Hunter Biden, the Vice-President's son, get plum jobs with Ukrainian energy companies in Kiev's new, American-centric dispensation. (Shades of the oil company jobs and sweetheart deals bestowed on the son of another Vice-President (and later President) back in the day: George Dubya Bush. I expect we will see good old Hunter stepping into America's increasingly dynastic political mix in the future.)

Barack Obama's economic strangulation of Russia is another example. As in all other cases of war-by-sanctions, these measures will not harm the elites in Russia nor cause the people to rise up as one and overthrow Putin. It only strengthens him politically -- and allows him to paint the legitimate opposition to his authoritarian rule as “unpatriotic,” at best, or “traitors” or “foreign agents” at worst.

(This dreary dynamic should be thoroughly familiar to anyone who has dissented even mildly against American policy over the last, oh, 100 years or so.) The only people who will suffer from Obama's sanctions will be the most vulnerable -- physically, financially, politically.

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In any case, if the Russian state actually does collapse under the pressure of sanctions and their economic destructiveness, it will almost certainly not be replaced by the liberal, open, tolerant, democratic, secular opposition that still bravely takes to the streets to protest Putin's rule. That was not the case in Iraq. It was not the case in Libya. It was not the case in Afghanistan, where the Americans and Saudis colluded in the destruction of secular government and the creation of the international jihadi movement. It will certainly not be the case in Syria. In the event of a sanctions-led downfall in Russia, the result will very likely be a regime even worse than Putin's -- one even more unstable, xenophobic, nationalistic, even more repressive and violent at home, more bellicose and unpredictable abroad. Or else there could be chaos and collapse on the Syrian or Libyan scale -- with nuclear weapons in the mix.

Yet far from reconsidering the policy of maximum pressure on Russia (that is to say, economic warfare whose main victims will be ordinary Russians -- and the ordinary Europeans who will suffer if the Russian economy is destroyed; as Smith says: "you cannot shove the world's No. 8 economy into the gutter and expect it to land there alone"), Obama keeps doubling down on the strategy. What's more, he keeps bragging about the damage he is doing to ordinary Russian people by economic warfare.

He did again in his State of the Union address, boasting with a Bush-like swagger, "Russia is isolated with its economy in tatters. That's how American leads." This followed a statement of such staggering, breathtaking, jaw-dropping hypocrisy that it almost surpasses comprehension. Describing his New Cold War policies, Obama actually said:

"We're upholding the principle that bigger nations can't bully the small."

This from the head of a government that spends every waking hour seeking to bend "small nations" to its will by hook, crook, violence and intimidation. This from a man who actually sits in his office every week and ticks off names of people to be killed -- without trial, without charge, without defense -- all over the world. This from a man who weekly shreds the sovereignty of other nations to rain sudden death on wedding parties, worshippers, farmers, picnickers, family homes and an endless parade of unknown, nameless people in distant villages and poverty-stricken regions whose "activities" -- observed from on high by robotic eyes -- are somehow considered to match the "signature" of those who somehow, in some way, might conceivably wish to somehow, in some way, do some kind of harm to America's "national interest" at some point in the future. This

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death-deserving behaviour might include things like two men putting shovels in a pick-up truck, or a group of Muslim farmers gathering goods for a trip to the market, or a shepherd carrying a rifle along a narrow path in some mountain wasteland (obviously on his way to shoot his secret atom bomb straight at Times Square).

This from a man who, in one of his first foreign policy triumphs, greenlighted a coup in Honduras when the existing government made mild noises about possibly curtailing the boundless privilege of the elite just a little bit, and now supports the repressive regime he helped into power. This from a man who boldly walked into CIA headquarters shortly after taking office and bravely told the agents there ... that none of them would ever be prosecuted for the sickening torture atrocities they committed and then brazenly covered up. This is the man who –

Well, enough. The list of the “bullying” that America is perpetrating in the world is too long to enumerate here. It is also well known to anyone who cares about such matters. Meanwhile, no amount of enumeration or outrage will change the minds of those (including most progressives) who see these facts but still believe that Washington has even the slightest crumb of moral standing from which to lecture other nations on their behavior -- much less gleefully leave those nations “in tatters” because they don't act as Washington wishes them too.

And for God's sake, let's not pretend that it is the “immorality” of Russian policies that have provoked the sanctions and the New Cold War. Any nation which counts as one of its staunchest allies the repressive feudal tyranny of Saudi Arabia is not concerned with the “morality” of any nation's behavior. (And again, if “morality” is the standard, what to make of a nation whose leader personally runs a death squad out of his office? And if taking over and holding territory, like Crimea, is a sanction-worthy crime, where are the sanctions against China or Israel?) No, what matters is how much any given nation might stand in the way of our elites' endless, heedless, shark-like appetite for power and profits. If you play ball -- or at least turn a blind eye -- to their domination agenda, then you are all right, Jack. But if you are thought to pose some kind of threat to that agenda -- or even offer a benign alternative to our elites' extremist ideology of domination -- then you will be dealt with, in one way or another, at some point.

Because Putin is odious, we can pretend that what Washington has done and is doing in Ukraine is not odious. We can pretend that Obama's genuinely stupid policy — dicing with the prospect of nuclear war just

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to grab a new trough for our elites to chow down in — is not a moral abomination that is degrading the lives of millions of people in Ukraine and Russia, and casting a minatory shadow over the future of our children. But this pretense doesn't change the reality. We are up to our necks — up to our nostrils — in a river of blood and folly.

UPDATE: Arthur Silber gives us a telling look at America's "moral authority" in his latest essay.

<http://www.globalresearch.ca/nato-invents-russian-threats-in-the-baltic-but-putins-next-big-play-is-greece/5432641>

NATO Invents Russian Threats in the Baltic – but Putin's Next Big Play is Greece

By Oliver Tickell

Global Research, February 22, 2015

The Ecologist

Region: Europe, Russia and FSU

While mainstream media promulgate a fictitious message of Russian threats in the Baltic, Vladimir Putin's next big play lies far to the south, writes Oliver Tickell. The gross intransigence of the EU, the IMF, the European Central Bank and Germany are forcing Greece into a powerful new economic and energy alliance with Russia that will reshape Europe – and for the better.

We could see Greece simply renouncing its manifestly unpayable and unjust €320 billion national debt, and quitting the Eurozone straitjacket – while receiving an emergency liquidity package from Russia to support the launch of the New Drachma.

Russian President Vladimir Putin will "launch a campaign of undercover attacks to destabilise the Baltic states on Nato's eastern flank", the Telegraph reports today – along with all other mainstream news media.

How do we know this? Because the UK's Defence Secretary Michael Fallon has said so. Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia watch out – the Russian peril is fast coming your way.

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“There are lots of worries”, Fallon told the newspaper.

“I’m worried about Putin. There’s no effective control of the border, I’m worried about his pressure on the Baltics, the way he is testing NATO, the submarines and aircraft ... They are modernising their conventional forces, they are modernising their nuclear forces and they are testing NATO, so we need to respond.”

Covert attack by Russia on the Baltic states is “a very real and present danger”, Fallon insisted.

Now where did we hear that before? Ah yes. On 16th December 1998 President Bill Clinton said that that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein presented “a clear and present danger” to the stability of the Persian Gulf and the safety of people everywhere.

We all know where that led: the Iraq war followed a few years later. We also know that the claim was a monstrous untruth: Saddam had no chemical, biological or nuclear weapons. So why should we believe Fallon now? Where is his evidence? He has none. When you already know the truth, who needs evidence?

Fallon – and NATO – should keep their eyes on the ball

But while Fallon’s attention is focused on the imaginary threat to the Baltic states, there is another country that really could be ‘at risk’ – and not because of cyber-attack, invasion by ‘green men’ or a campaign of destabilisation emanating from the Kremlin.

No, the EU, the European Central Bank, the IMF and European finance ministers have already been doing all the destabilisation that’s needed – forcing Greece into a deep programme of austerity that has seen the economy shrink by 25% over five years, the closure of vital public services, mass unemployment and the forced sell-off of public assets.

And now the Greeks – and their newly elected Syriza government – have had enough. This week the Greek prime minister Alexis Tsipras flatly refused to renew the €240 billion ‘bailout’ package, which comes with all the austerity strings, and he today advanced proposals for a ‘six-month assistance package’ free of harsh conditions to give Greece time to renegotiate its debt.

The standoff continues, and will be decided tomorrow by EU finance ministers. It’s not looking good: Germany has already stated that the Greek proposal “does not meet the conditions”. But if the finance

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ministers don't agree, then what?

You guessed it: Tsipras will turn to Russia. Earlier this month Tsipras and Putin agreed on a range of bilateral ties, including the construction of a pipeline that would carry Russian natural gas from the Turkish border across Greece to the other countries of southern Europe.

This follows the re-routing of the 'South Stream' pipeline, which had been due to cross Bulgaria but was effectively blocked by the EU's retrospective application of energy market rules, under heavy pressure from the USA. Last November and December Putin negotiated the pipeline's realignment across Turkey with Turkish President Erdogan – right up to the Greek border.

Following the agreement between Putin and Tsipras, which came complete with an invitation to Moscow on Victory over the Nazis day, 9th May, the pipeline link to the major countries of southern Europe is now complete, at least on paper. And once it's built, Greece will effectively control – and profit from – that gas supply, and take a strategic position in Europe's energy landscape.

But Greece is a NATO member!

Greece's increasingly warm relationship with Russia is already causing concern among other EU and NATO countries. German Defense Minister Ursula von Der Leyen has said that Greece was "putting at risk its position in the NATO alliance with its approach to Russia."

This provoked a fierce retort from Greek Defense Minister Panos Kammenos who branded the attack as "unacceptable and extortionate" - noting that "Greece was always on the side of the Allies when they pushed back German occupation troops."

"Statements that replace the EU and NATO's institutional bodies are unacceptable as blackmailing", he added. "They undermine the European institutions except if Germany's aim is to dissolve the European Union and the NATO."

So if Tsipras's refinancing proposal is refused tomorrow will Greece quit NATO and the EU, to join the Eurasian Union? Not if Mr Putin gets his way: Greece is worth much more to Russia as an ally within the EU and NATO than outside – where it can veto more trade sanctions against Russia, block the TTIP and CETA trade deals with the USA and Canada, and oppose NATO's increasing belligerence from within.

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But we could see Greece simply renouncing its manifestly unpayable and unjust €320 billion national debt, and quitting the Eurozone straitjacket – while receiving an emergency liquidity package from Russia to support the launch of the New Drachma.

In fact, we could see a re-run of important elements of the Ukraine play of December 2013, when Russia offered a support package under which it would buy \$15 billion in bonds from Ukraine, supporting its collapsing currency, and supply it with deeply discounted gas – £268 per cubic metre rather than the market price of \$400.

A \$15 billion purchase of New Drachma denominated Greek bonds would be a superb launch for Greece's new currency, and would firmly cement Greece's long term alliance with Russia, providing it with a valuable long term bridgehead into both the EU and NATO.

This move would also give inspiration and confidence to progressive political movements across Europe that take inspiration from Syriza's fight for economic justice – in Spain, Portugal, Ireland, Italy, the UK and beyond – and bear the powerful message: there is an alternative.

And while NATO, the EU, the USA and their loyal servants, among them the UK's Michael Fallon, deliberately whip up a fictitious threat in the Baltic, ignoring the real danger they face to the south, the masterly Mr Putin would once again make fools of them all.

Oliver Tickell edits The Ecologist, but this article is written in a personal capacity.