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Many Russian immigrants in Southern California believe propaganda that Nazis thrive in Ukraine

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Member of the military in Ukraine holds the Ukrainian flag. Photo by Alim Yakubov via Shutterstock.com.

reaches the U.S.

As part of our mission to produce unbiased information on critical social issues, A-Mark Foundation sponsored a fellowship for reporting on misinformation and disinformation in partnership with the Los Angeles Press Club. This article is the result of that fellowship.

By Olga Grigoryants, originally published by [Los Angeles Daily News](#) with funding from A-Mark Foundation.

Shortly after Russian forces launched their full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Gary Rapoport, a real estate broker in Burbank, showed pictures of a destroyed apartment in his native city of Odesa to his relatives in Los Angeles, convinced that the grueling images of families' shattered homes would make them acknowledge the [disastrous impact of Russia's war on Ukraine](#).

Yet they seemed unimpressed.

His relatives in Los Angeles examined the images of the wreckage in Odesa and told him the pictures were fake. They said Russians would never commit atrocities against Ukrainians.

Rapoport was shocked and realized his relatives perceived the war as an attack by Ukrainians on [Russian-language speakers](#), a large minority group living in Ukraine. He couldn't help but wonder if they were influenced by reports and narratives from pro-Kremlin news outlets easily found online in the U.S.

In an interview with this news organization, Rapoport said his relatives believe news on the Kremlin-controlled TV station, Channel One, more than they believe him. "Russian propaganda is very powerful. It has convinced people that Ukrainians are a nation of nationalists and Nazis," he said.

Robert English, director of USC's School of International Relations, said the Kremlin "has taken the lessons of World War II and twisted and adapted them to create the menace, the looming threat of revived Nazism that is directed against Russians. And Jews don't even seem to figure in this story. It's a strange twisting of history to serve the political needs of the present."

He added: "Nazis were targeting Jews and cleaning out the ghettos and rounding them up and focusing overwhelmingly on Jews, (but) that's not how Soviets and Russians were taught in the era of (Joseph) Stalin and (Leonid) Brezhnev. It was sanitized so Jews as primary victims were removed and it became Soviets. And even if Jews were killed and that was admitted, they were Jewish but they were Soviets."

Before Vladimir Putin became Russia's president, English said, "There was a very mild appreciation of how particularly vicious Nazis were against Jews (during World War II) — because Russians have always been taught that we all suffered equally. We were all 'Soviet.'"

Rapoport was baffled and frustrated with his relatives for blaming the U.S. and Europe for prolonging [the war in Ukraine](#). He said they repeated the lines spread by the Kremlin's pundits on Channel One and other state-owned TV channels.

"Our people have been brainwashed for a long time," Rapoport said in Russian. "Our people don't understand that Channel One is sponsored by the Kremlin. When the war started, they already hated Ukrainians. By that time, propaganda had done its work."

Like Rapoport, Eugene Maysky, chair of the Russian-Speaking Advisory Board of the City of West Hollywood, is perplexed by the impact the Kremlin's views have had on his fellow Russians in the U.S.

Russian immigrants, Maysky said, are susceptible to anti-West and anti-NATO rhetoric because they grew up on Soviet and Russian movies blasting the West and glorifying Russian power. Even after moving to the U.S., for immigrants, Russian TV — which broadcasts Soviet movies along with pro-Kremlin programs — remains the main source of entertainment and information.

"Putin's PR team somehow came up with an idea that it would be easy to convince Russians that there are Nazis in Ukraine," Maysky said in Russian. "They used stories from World War II about Nazis attacking Russians. We all grew up with movies about the Soviet Union being attacked by Nazis and then defeating them during World War II. That narrative is easy to sell to Russians."

Rapoport remembers that before the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russians acted like "big brothers" over Ukrainians. "There was a foundation for this attitude of Putin that says: 'Ukraine is not really a nation. It's just a dialect of the Russian language. Kyiv is Russia.' There was definitely a lot of that, even in previous decades."

But since the 2014 Maidan Revolution that ousted Ukraine's pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich, English at USC explained, there has been "this narrative of 'bad Ukrainians' threatening Russia." An era of widespread hatred grew in Russia toward Ukrainians, "something that was manufactured very recently," English said.

That experience prompted Rapoport, who arrived in the U.S. in 1991, to question how the Kremlin influenced his fellow Russian expats living 6,000 miles away from Moscow in Southern California. According to the U.S. Census, most of the 600,000 expats live in Los Angeles and Orange counties, but Russian speakers have also settled in Riverside and San Bernardino counties.

"The scariest thing is that it's impossible to convince (relatives) of anything other than their beliefs," Rapoport said. "The propaganda is strong. I didn't find one person who would move to the bright side."

On U.S. cable, the power of Russian TV

The majority of Russian news TV cable channels seen in the U.S. are tightly controlled by the far-off Kremlin, according to English. Recent research by Russian independent polling organization Levada found that 62% of Russians get their news from TV.

Many expats watch popular Kremlin propagandists such as Vladimir Solovyov, a prominent radio and television anchor for the state-owned TV and radio stations known as "Putin's voice." Solovyov proclaimed in 2022 that "Ukraine is a Nazi state."

Weeks after the start of the war in Ukraine, Solovyov said, "Ukrainians are killing their civilians to frame Russia, while Russia targets only military objects."

UC Riverside professor and Ukraine-Russia expert Paul D'Anieri says "Propaganda is part of any war and the goal is to weaken the support for Ukraine by convincing people that Ukrainians are not the victim here, but the perpetrator."

The idea that Ukraine has been inundated by Nazis, he explained, goes back to World War II.

"There were a small number of Ukrainians who collaborated with Nazis," D'Anieri explained. "There were Russians, Belarusians, and Americans who collaborated with Nazis as well. But millions of Ukrainians died fighting against the Nazis. There's this phenomenon that if you say stuff over and over again, people tend to believe that there must be some truth in it."

Another reason some Russians believe government and media propaganda, D'Anieri said, is because, "If I'm Russian and I don't believe that stuff about Ukrainian 'Nazis,' then what do I have to believe about my own society? I have to believe that my own society is engaging in this genocide against people that we swear are our brothers. That is not a very easy thing to swallow."

West Hollywood has a population of about 35,000 and nearly 20% of its residents are Russian speakers. Sofiya Fikhman, 84, a Russian Jew in West Hollywood who moved to Southern California in the early 1990s, turns on her Russian TV show right after she comes home from the Russian library where she volunteers three times a week.

During the Nazi occupation of Belarus during World War II, her family was forced into a Jewish ghetto in Nazi-occupied Odesa. She says she watches the latest news before bed, usually Channel One, despite pleas from her grandchildren to stop watching the Russian news.

"When you live alone, have no one to talk to, you end up watching TV a lot," she said in Russian, adding that she felt sad for residents of her hometown, Odesa, whose homes and schools have been destroyed by Russian forces.

Friends take sides over 'Little Russia'

Maysky, the chair of the Russian-speaking board in West Hollywood, says the Kremlin "is using stories from World War II because they are still remembered by older Russians. Putin's team probably thought: 'There are people who still remember fighting the Nazis during World War II and sharing those stories with their children, so it would be easy to convince them that Nazis still exist in Ukraine. That's why Russia has to fight against Ukraine.'"

The issue of propaganda divides even younger Russians. Maysky, 48, recently blocked several friends on Facebook who support Putin, and he cut off a longtime friend who believed Kremlin's justification of the war in Ukraine.

"I can't believe that a grownup man my age who traveled the world can seriously believe everything that the Russian government says," Maysky said. "You can't be friends (if they) believe the idiotic Russian propaganda, even if you were friends with someone half of your life. That's the tragedy of modern times because many of my friends are affected by the virus of Russian propaganda."

He warned, "we can't ignore that monstrous propaganda machine."

According to English of USC, in 2014 Russians began hearing from the Kremlin that Nazis were targeting Russians in Ukraine. That year Russia invaded the Crimean Peninsula and annexed that part of Ukraine.

"That's when the mythology grew huge," he said, citing the key propaganda they used: "Russians were at risk and that the Russian language was being distinguished, and the Russian culture was being suppressed. Russians, Russians, Russians were the victims of these Nazis, Nazis, Nazis."

TV can be powerful, English added. Especially for older people who grew up in the 1960s and 1970s, television remains "the main source of news and it's so propagandistic now."

He added that "Jews were written out. They were downplayed. They were all but ignored as special victims in the Soviet Union. The Soviets wrote a version in history in which Soviets were the victims, not Jews."

Although young Russians, “were not brainwashed and indoctrinated in the 1960s and 1970s like the older generation,” English said, “they still got the full force of the last 20 years of Putin’s indoctrination.”

“Maybe they don’t believe the propaganda fully, but once you feel isolated and hated by the world, you slip back into the official verse,” he said of younger Russians. “They feel abandoned by the West. They feel blamed by everyone else. It’s paradoxical, but it’s powerful.”

TV host and commentator Vladimir Solovyov’s views are supported by Russians who believe the war on Ukraine was necessary to protect Russian speakers in Ukraine who were threatened by pro-Ukraine nationalists, according to English.

Russian talk shows, English said, are “sleekly produced and have good production quality. They can be seductive and they appeal to people who watch Soviet-era TV. There’s something comforting in being told ‘this is what’s right’ and you want to be with the majority.”

In his 2015 book *Winter is Coming*, chess grandmaster Garry Kasparov wrote, “The false narrative that Russia is surrounded by enemies who are intent on holding it back fills Putin’s need for fuel for his increasingly fascist propaganda. ... Putin’s regime is as obsessed with Soviet suffering and victory in World War II as the Soviet Union ever was.”

Kasparov, the World Chess Champion from 1985 to 2000 and today a political activist, added, “Along with the victimhood claim (in this case, legitimate), the WWII fixation fits the Kremlin’s desire to call all of its enemies fascists, despite all evidence to the contrary. Their bizarre logic goes, ‘We defeated fascists in WWII, and so everyone who opposes us is fascist.’”

Last year when Rapoport’s relatives in West Hollywood saw TV reports of destroyed buildings on the street where their family had lived in Odesa, his relatives told Rapoport that Ukrainians had ravaged their former neighborhood — and that Russians would never kill civilians.

The idea that Russians are superior to Ukrainians has been expressed by propagandist Solovyov and other pro-Kremlin propagandists, and Putin has referred to Ukraine as *Malorossiya*, which means “Little Russia” in English.

D’Anieri at UC Riverside said the narrative of Little Russia, the concept that Ukrainians are the younger brothers of Russians, is spread by Kremlin propagandists and goes back to the idea that “Ukrainians should know their place.”

“There’s also this idea that Ukrainians by themselves can’t want to be independent of Russia because Ukrainians love being ruled by Russia,” D’Anieri said. “Therefore, if Ukraine is trying to break away from Russia, it means some alien force in Ukraine is doing this. And that can either be Nazis or it could be Americans. But it’s not Ukraine.”

Jokes about Ukrainians and other ethnic groups were common, said English at USC. “There was a chauvinistic attitude, but it was not hatred. It became something worse as state propaganda started telling (Russians) that (Ukrainians) were enemies, telling them that they were threatening.”

How Kremlin’s propaganda reaches the U.S.

As the Russian-Ukraine war saw its second anniversary this year on February 24, Rapoport’s relatives remained adamant about their support for the Kremlin.

Rapoport said he tried to turn off the Russian TV channel or play pro-Ukrainian channels but “once they stop watching Russian TV, (they) go through painful withdrawal like drug addicts.”

But there are many ways for propaganda to reach expats in the U.S., according to Elina Treyger, a senior political scientist at the RAND Corp., whose work focuses on immigration enforcement, disinformation and misinformation.

The U.S. Department of State, which monitors foreign disinformation, identified “the pillars of the Russian disinformation and propaganda ecosystem,” said Treyger. The pillars include state officials and their statements on social media, and state-sponsored or state-affiliated media, including RT — Russia Today — and Channel One.

Other sources include proxy actors, Treyger said, who are “not part of the Russian state, they’re not necessarily being directed by the Russian state — although sometimes we don’t know — but they, for a whole host of motivations, amplify and spread Russian talking points.”

The late Yevgeny Prigozhin, the head of the Wagner Group of mercenaries in Russia, admitted in 2023 that he established and financed the Internet Research Agency (IRA), a vast troll farm — an organized group of internet trolls that attempted to interfere in political opinions and decision-making. The U.S. Treasury Department sanctioned IRA in 2018 for creating a massive number of fake online accounts — posting as individuals, organizations and grassroots groups — to impact U.S. voters.

From 2013 to 2018, campaigns on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter created by the IRA reached tens of millions of U.S. users, according to a report published in 2018 by the Computational Propaganda Research Project at the Oxford Internet Institute, which studied the use of social media before and during the 2016 elections.

The Kremlin, Elina Treyger said, has been “fixated on the power of the information space for a long time, since the internet became a thing.”

There was nothing Putin wanted more than to cancel the Internet, Treyger said, noting that “he didn’t cancel the Russian Internet but he reshaped it, allowing for the dominance of the Kremlin’s narratives.”

Treyger says the Kremlin has “the advantage of being authoritarian on the inside, pulling information flow while injecting their narratives into our information landscape. That’s definitely a weakness that democracies have.”

Jared McBride, an assistant professor at UCLA, said there are several reasons why some Russian speakers accept the Kremlin’s propaganda after years of living abroad.

“You have Russian immigrants who never fully acclimated — not just linguistically but culturally — didn’t acclimate to America,” McBride said. “They socially don’t hang out with people outside their Soviet circles and then linguistically didn’t learn English.”

For many of those who never acclimated, he added, Channel One and similar news outlets linked with the Kremlin remained the main source of information, and “there is no reason to switch when you’re 65 or 70 years old, living in West Hollywood.”

Rapoport said he hasn't been able to bring any of his friends or relatives to "the bright side" and convince them to question and stop believing Russian propaganda.

Moscow aimed the propaganda to reach as many Russian speakers around the world as possible, he said, and it gave them a sense of unity and belonging — feelings that immigrants tend to crave.

"Kremlin's propaganda works well," he said. "It shows (Russians) have a common enemy. It shows that the West and Ukraine are against us. That evokes strong emotions among many people. And that gives them a sense of purpose."

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