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The antisemitism animating Putin's claim to 'denazify' Ukraine

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The Russian leader's pretext for invasion recasts Ukraine's Jewish president as a Nazi and Russian Christians as true victims of the Holocaust

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When [Vladimir Putin](#) announced Russia's invasion of Ukraine at dawn on Thursday, he justified the "special military operation" as having the goal to "denazify" Ukraine. The justification is not tenable, but it would be a mistake simply to dismiss it.

Vladimir Putin is himself a fascist autocrat, one who [imprisons democratic opposition leaders](#) and critics. He is [the acknowledged leader of the global far right](#), which looks increasingly like a global fascist movement.

Ukraine does have a far-right movement, and its armed defenders include [the Azov battalion, a far-right nationalist militia group](#). But no democratic country is free of far-right nationalist groups, including the United States. In the 2019 election, the Ukrainian far right was humiliated, receiving only 2% of the vote. This is far less support than far-right parties receive across western Europe, including inarguably democratic countries such as France and Germany.



▶◀ Putin references neo-Nazis and drug addicts in bizarre speech to Russian security council - video

Ukraine is a democratic country, whose popular president was elected, in a free and fair election, with over 70% of the vote. That president, Volodymyr Zelenskiy, is Jewish, and comes from a [family partially wiped out](#) in the Nazi Holocaust.

Putin's claim that Russia is invading [Ukraine](#) to denazify it is therefore absurd on its face. But understanding why Putin justifies the invasion of democratic Ukraine in this way sheds important light on what is happening not only in eastern Europe, but worldwide.

Fascism is a cult of the leader, who promises national restoration in the face of supposed humiliation by ethnic or religious minorities, liberals, feminists, immigrants, and homosexuals. The fascist leader claims the nation has been humiliated and its masculinity threatened by these forces. It must regain its former glory (and often its former territory) with violence. He offers himself as the only one who can restore it.

Central to European fascism is the idea that it is the Jews who are the agents of moral decay. According to European fascism, it is the Jews who bring a country under the domination of (Jewish) global elite, by using the tools of liberal democracy, secular humanism, feminism and gay rights, which are used to introduce decadence, weakness and impurity. Fascist antisemitism is racial rather than religious in origin, targeting Jews as a corrupt stateless race who seek global domination.

Fascism justifies its violence by offering to protect a supposedly pure religious and national identity from the forces of liberalism. In the west, fascism presents itself as the defender of European Christianity against these forces, as well as mass Muslim migration. Fascism in the west is thus increasingly hard to distinguish from Christian nationalism.



📷 Pro-Ukrainian protesters gather during a protest in Tel Aviv this week. Photograph: Abir Sultan/EPA

Putin, the leader of Russian Christian nationalism, has come to view himself as the global leader of Christian nationalism, and is increasingly regarded as such by Christian nationalists around the world, [including in the United States](#). Putin has emerged as a leader of this movement in part because of [the global reach](#) of recent Russian fascist thinkers such as Alexander Dugin and Alexander Prokhanov who laid its groundwork.

It is easy to recognize, in Putin's invasion of Ukraine, the roadmap laid out in recent years by Dugin and Prokhanov, major figures in Putin's [Russia](#). Both Dugin and Prokhanov viewed an independent Ukraine as an existential threat to their goal,

which Timothy Snyder, in his 2018 book *The Road to Unfreedom*, describes as “a desire for the return of Soviet power in fascist form”.

The form of Russian fascism Dugin and Prokhanov defended is like the central versions of European fascism - explicitly antisemitic. As Snyder writes, “... if Prokhanov had a core belief, it was the endless struggle of the empty and abstract sea-people against the hearty and righteous land-people. Like Adolf Hitler, Prokhanov blamed world Jewry for inventing the ideas that enslaved his homeland. He also blamed them for the [Holocaust](#).”

The dominant version of antisemitism alive in parts of eastern Europe today is that Jews employ the Holocaust to seize the victimhood narrative from the “real” victims of the Nazis, who are Russian Christians (or other non-Jewish eastern Europeans). Those who embrace Russian Christian nationalist ideology will be especially susceptible to this strain of antisemitism.

■ Like Hitler, Prokhanov blamed world Jewry for inventing the ideas that enslaved his homeland
Timothy Snyder

With this background, we can understand why Putin chose the actions he did, as well as the words he used to justify them. Ukraine has always been the primary target of those who seek to restore “Soviet power in fascist form”. Echoing familiar fascist antisemitic tropes, in a [2021 article](#), former Russian president Dmitry Medvedev denounced Zelenskiy as disgusting, corrupt and faithless. The free democratic election of a Jewish president confirms in the fascist mind that the fascist bogeyman of liberal democracy as a tool for global Jewish domination is real.

By claiming that the aim of the invasion is to “denazify” Ukraine, Putin appeals to the myths of contemporary eastern European antisemitism - that a global cabal of Jews were (and are) the real agents of violence against Russian Christians and the real victims of the Nazis were not the Jews, but rather this group. Russian Christians are targets of a conspiracy by a global elite, who, using the vocabulary of liberal democracy and human rights, attack the Christian faith and the Russian nation. Putin's propaganda is not aimed at an obviously skeptical west, but rather appeals domestically to this strain of Christian nationalism.

There are broader morals here. The attack on liberal democracy in the west comes from a global fascist movement, whose center is Christian nationalism. It will be hard to disentangle this movement from antisemitism (albeit a version of antisemitism that allies with forces pushing for a Jewish nationalist state in Israel). Unsurprisingly, proponents of the view that a Christian nation needs protection and

defense against liberalism, “globalism” and their supposed decadence, will be marshaled to their most violent actions when the faces of free, secular, tolerant liberal democracy prominently include Jewish ones.

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