

Repression, poverty & war: Five years of the coup regime in Ukraine

written by Greg Butterfield
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People protest U.S. intervention in Kharkov, Ukraine, April 2014. Photo: Borotba

Five years have passed since the Obama administration helped to overthrow the elected president of Ukraine in February 2014 and installed a far-right dictatorship loyal to Washington. Today, the Trump administration is trying to carry out a similar regime change in Venezuela.

In the 1990s, the breakup of the socialist Soviet Union and the restoration of capitalism caused enormous hardships for working people in Ukraine and all of the former Soviet republics.

What have these last five years brought to the Ukrainian people?

Today, workers are poorer than ever, thanks to austerity measures demanded by the [International Monetary Fund and World Bank](#), whose loans keep the current regime in Kiev afloat.

[Utility and heating prices](#) are through the roof. More and more people, especially young workers, are forced to migrate to other countries in search of work.

Privatization has sped up, with U.S. and Western European [agribusiness](#) and energy companies among the biggest beneficiaries. Energoatom, the company that oversees Ukraine's nuclear power plants, [secured funding from Washington](#) to build a nuclear waste storage facility — widely seen as a precursor to turning central and eastern Ukraine into a toxic waste dump for NATO after Germany rejected that honor.

Who oversaw these brutal “reforms”? None other than Democratic Vice President Joe Biden, who served as the virtual colonial governor of Ukraine from 2014 through 2016. Today, Biden is touted as a possible “progressive” challenger to Donald Trump in 2020.



U.S. Senators John McCain and Chris Murphy alongside fascist leader Oleh Tyahnybok at Euromaidan rally in Kiev, December 2013.

Rampant repression

Independent union activity is repressed, and so are workers' organizations.

The Communist Party of Ukraine, once the country's largest political organization, cannot get on the ballot for this spring's presidential elections, although a law to ban the party outright is [still under appeal](#). Its symbols are prohibited and its supporters, even elderly people, face violent attacks when they gather in public.

Struggle-La Lucha spoke with Alexey Albu, a former deputy of the Odessa Regional

Council and a leader of the revolutionary Marxist organization [Borotba \(Struggle\)](#), which is outlawed in Ukraine. Albu was forced to leave the country under threat of death in May 2014. He has been working from exile for Ukraine's liberation for nearly five years.

According to Albu, the number of political prisoners in Ukraine peaked at around 1,500 in 2015. The numbers have declined since then, though objective figures are unavailable. Many prisoners were deported or exchanged for Ukrainian troops captured in the Donbass; some have been acquitted and others have cut deals after becoming demoralized. But arrests of leftists, journalists and other opponents of the regime are still frequent.

Ukraine has become a veritable base for the U.S.-dominated NATO military alliance. NATO arms, trains and advises Ukraine in its criminal war against the people of the Donbass region. That [includes neo-Nazi battalions](#) incorporated into the "official" armed forces structure.

President Petro Poroshenko has promised to enshrine joining NATO in the Ukrainian Constitution if he is re-elected this year, as is widely expected.



Fascists massacred at least 48 people in Odessa on May 2, 2014.

Regime change model

The Euromaidan movement, the public face of the violent coup that called itself the “Revolution of Dignity,” followed a pattern that will seem familiar to those observing today’s campaign against the government of Bolivarian Venezuela.

The same code words of “democratic movement” versus “dictatorship,” demonization of foreign leaders and their allies, and crocodile tears for the suffering of the common people, were all in play.

For years, Republican and Democratic administrations in Washington sought out

alliances with local oligarchs seeking greater economic ties with the West, who were willing to open up the country to U.S. economic, political and military domination, and to aid the U.S. campaign to isolate Ukraine's historic trading partner Russia. They put pressure on Ukraine's officials to get with the Western program.

Students and intellectuals of the Ukrainian upper classes and diaspora were trained in regime change methods, including the manipulation of Western "human rights" rhetoric and social media. And Washington [coordinated closely with the neo-Nazi right wing](#), long nurtured in the U.S. and Canada during the Soviet period, who flooded back after the fall of the USSR.

Flexing its "humanitarian intervention" muscles to the fullest, Washington pushed forward Western-approved, "progressive" nongovernmental organizations as the face of the Euromaidan movement. But today when women attempt to [march against rampant domestic violence](#) or the LGBTQ community [organizes events in Kiev](#), they are quickly suppressed by security forces and neo-Nazi gangs — who were the real core of the 2014 coup.

It's a pattern of manipulation and disinformation aimed at confusing public opinion generally and the progressive movement in particular, both in the targeted country and abroad, and used many times in the past quarter century, from Yugoslavia to Libya to Nicaragua to Syria — and, of course, in Venezuela.



Bombed-out home on the outskirts of Donetsk, May 2016. SLL photo by Greg Butterfield

Bombs are still falling

On Feb. 18, [three bombs exploded](#) in the center of Donetsk, capital of the Donetsk People's Republic. The explosions happened near governmental offices and the headquarters of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) mission that is supposed to monitor truce violations. Later than night, villages on the republic's borders faced intense shelling by Ukrainian military units.

The war on Donetsk and Lugansk, begun by Kiev shortly after the coup five years ago, continues. Although the fiercest fighting ended after Ukrainian troops were routed in the Debaltsevo operation in February 2015, civilians continue to die, and homes, schools and hospitals continue to be bombed. Ukrainian terrorist actions have surged in the past year, including the [assassination of Donetsk leader Alexander Zakharchenko](#) last summer.

According to the [most recent report](#) of the United Nations Monitoring Mission on Human Rights, from April 2014 to the end of 2018 some 12,800 to 13,000 people were killed in the war. But many people believe this is a vast undercount. In 2015, a [report leaked](#) from the German intelligence services estimated the number of dead at 50,000.

Anti-fascist uprising

Although geopolitical and economic competition underpinned splitting Ukraine, hatred of Russia and Russian-speaking Ukrainians, as well as other national minorities, was fuel that the right wing used to power its 2014 coup. Russian speakers make up the majority of the population in the country's east, which is also more working class in composition and where the anti-fascist and internationalist traditions of Soviet times remain strong.

Many of these eastern cities rose up in resistance against the pro-U.S. coup. Crimea, home to a naval base coveted by the U.S., [voted to leave Ukraine](#) and rejoined Russia. Residents of the Donbass mining region seized government buildings and declared independence. A [popular referendum](#) in May 2014 overwhelmingly approved independence from now U.S.-allied Ukraine, creating the anti-fascist Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics.

Ukraine started a war against Donbass even before the independence vote. It hasn't stopped for a single day, despite a peace agreement — brokered by Germany,

France and Russia in 2015 — called the Minsk Accords. Kiev's forces violate the military side of this agreement on a daily basis, while the government has refused to enact the political measures that would guarantee some protections to Donetsk and Lugansk.

An [economic blockade](#) is another component of the ongoing war against Donetsk and Lugansk residents. The only available route for trade in needed food, medicine and other essentials is through Russia. Any company or individual that trades with the republics is subject to U.S. and European sanctions, as well as making themselves a target for the fascists. And Russia itself has been subject to tightened sanctions.

Rise of fascism and white supremacy

This May 2 will mark five years since one of the worst atrocities of the Ukrainian coup: the Odessa massacre, when nearly 50 anti-fascists were burned, shot and clubbed to death by a fascist mob in that port city.

Family members and friends still gather on the second day of every month to commemorate the fallen outside the House of Trade Unions, despite frequent attacks by police and fascists.

Everyone knows about the growth of white supremacist and fascist organizations and violent acts in the U.S. and Western Europe in these last five years. How is this connected to the coup in Ukraine and other imperialist regime-change operations?

Last year a group of armed white supremacists, who took part in the Charlottesville events that killed anti-fascist Heather Heyer, were indicted in California. Among the specifics on their FBI rap sheet: that they had [trained with the neo-Nazi Azov Battalion](#) in Ukraine.

This is more than just an isolated case of blowback. Over many years, the U.S. export of and support for fascist violence abroad, to maintain its empire of profits,

has inevitably found its way back home. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said during the Vietnam War, the bombs dropped on other countries also explode here.

In the coming weeks, Struggle-La Lucha will publish a series of interviews with activists, militia fighters and political leaders exploring the effects of the last five years on the workers of Ukraine and the Donbass republics, political exiles, women, youth and others. These voices of Ukrainian anti-fascists will not only help to expose the reality hidden by Washington and the mass media, but may also offer important lessons for our own struggle against the ultraright and imperialism.

Greg Butterfield is the coordinator of Solidarity with Novorossiia & Antifascists in Ukraine. He has written extensively on developments in Ukraine and Donbass since 2014. In September 2014, he visited Crimea to meet with exiled Ukrainian activists; when he attempted to visit the city of Kharkov in eastern Ukraine, he was deported at gunpoint. In 2016, he went to Donetsk and Lugansk, attending an anti-fascist conference and visiting the people's militia near the front line. Many of his articles and translations can be found at Red Star Over Donbass.

