

Twisting Putin's Words on Ukraine

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Russian President Vladimir Putin delivering a speech on the Ukraine crisis in Moscow on March 18, 2014. (Russian government photo)

Anti-Russian bias pervades the mainstream U.S. media in the Ukraine crisis, reflected in word choices - "pro-democracy" for U.S.-favored protesters in Kiev, "terrorists" for disfavored eastern Ukrainians - but also in how the narrative is shaped by false summaries.

Sometimes dealing with the waves of U.S. media propaganda on the Ukraine crisis feels like the proverbial Dutch boy putting his fingers in the dike. The flood of deeply prejudiced anti-Russian "group think" extends across the entire media waterfront - from left to right - and it often seems hopeless correcting each individual falsehood.

The problem is made worse by the fact that the New York Times, the traditional newspaper of record, has stood out as one of the most egregious offenders of the principles of journalism. Repeatedly, the Times has run anti-Russian stories that lack evidence or are just flat wrong.

Among the flat-wrong stories was the Times' big front-page [scoop](#) on photos that purportedly showed Russian troops inside eastern Ukraine, but the story had to be [retracted](#) two days later when it turned out that a key photo - allegedly of several men "clearly" in Russia before they later turned up in Ukraine - was actually taken in Ukraine, destroying the story's premise.

The other type of Times' propaganda - making assertions without evidence - appeared in another front-page [story](#) about Russian President Vladimir Putin's phantom wealth (\$40 billion to \$70 billion, the Times speculated) [without presenting a shred of hard evidence](#) beyond what looked like a pricy watch on his wrist.

However, in some ways, the worst of the New York Times reporting has been its slanted and erroneous summations of the Ukraine narrative. For instance, immediately after the violent coup overthrowing elected President Viktor Yanukovich (from Feb. 20-22), it was reported that among the 80 people killed were more than a dozen police officers.

But, as the pro-coup sympathies hardened inside the Times, the storyline changed to: "More than 80 protesters were shot to death by the police as an uprising spiraled out of control in mid-February." [NYT, March 5]

Both the dead police and the murky circumstances surrounding the sniper fire that inflicted many of the casualties simply disappeared from the Times' narrative. It became flat fact: evil "pro-Yanukovich" police gunned down innocent "pro-democracy" demonstrators.

Also consigned to the memory hole was the key role played by well-organized neo-Nazi militias that led the final assaults on the police.

More recently, the Times' Ukraine summary has challenged Putin's denials that Russian special forces are operating in eastern Ukraine (the point that the bogus photo scoop was supposed to prove). So, now whenever Putin's denial is noted, the Times contradicts him by claiming that he made the same denial about Crimea, that Russian troops weren't involved, and then reversed himself later.

For instance, in Friday's editions, the Times wrote: "Mr. Putin has said there are no Russian troops in eastern Ukraine. He made similar claims during the annexation of Crimea, however, and then later acknowledged the existence of a Russian operation."

But that simply isn't true. The Russians never denied having troops in Crimea, since that's where they maintain a major Black Sea naval base in Sevastopol and had a contractual agreement with Ukraine allowing the presence of up to 25,000 troops. At the time of the Feb. 22 coup, Russia had about 16,000 troops in Crimea and that was well known as Crimea began to break away from the post-coup regime in Kiev.

On March 4, the Associated Press [reported](#) that "the new Ukrainian leadership that deposed the pro-Russian Yanukovich ... has accused Moscow of a military invasion in Crimea. The Kremlin, which does not recognize the new Ukrainian leadership, insists it made the move in order to protect Russian installations in Ukraine and its citizens living there.

"On Tuesday, Russian troops who had taken control of the Belbek air base in the hotly contest[ed] Crimea region fired warning shots into the air as around 300 Ukrainian soldiers, who previously manned the airfield, demanded their jobs back. ...

"The shots reflected tensions running high in the Black Sea peninsula since Russian troops - estimated by Ukrainian authorities to be 16,000 strong - tightened their grip over the weekend on the Crimean peninsula, where Moscow's Black Sea Fleet is based.

"Ukraine has accused Russia of violating a bilateral agreement on conditions of a Russian lease of a naval base in Crimea that restricts troop movements, but Russia has argued that it was acting within the limits set by the deal.

"Russia's ambassador to the United Nations, Vitaly Churkin, said Monday [March 3] at the U.N. Security Council that Russia was entitled to deploy up to 25,000 troops in Crimea under the agreement. Churkin didn't specify how many Russian troops are now stationed in Crimea, but said that 'they are acting in a way they consider necessary to protect their facilities and prevent extremist actions.'"

Putin's Comments

Also on March 4, Putin discussed another public confrontation in Crimea at a Moscow [press conference](#). He said: "You should note that, thank God, not a single gunshot has been fired there; there are no casualties, except for that crush on the square about a week ago. What was going on there? People came, surrounded units of the [Ukrainian] armed forces and talked to them, convincing them to follow the demands and the will of the people living in that area. There was not a single armed conflict, not a single gunshot.

“Thus the tension in Crimea that was linked to the possibility of using our Armed Forces simply died down and there was no need to use them. The only thing we had to do, and we did it, was to enhance the defense of our military facilities because they were constantly receiving threats and we were aware of the armed nationalists moving in. We did this, it was the right thing to do and very timely.”

So, Putin did not deny that Russian troops were present in Crimea. He even acknowledged that they were operational and were prepared to take action in defense of Crimean citizens if necessary.

Arguably, Putin did dissemble on one point, though the precise circumstances were unclear. When a reporter asked him about a specific case of some people “wearing uniforms that strongly resembled the Russian Army uniform,” he demurred, claiming “those were local self-defense units.”

A Formal Speech

Two days after a hastily called referendum, which recorded a 96 percent vote in favor of seceding from Ukraine and rejoining Russia, Putin returned to the issue of Russian involvement in Crimea, a territory that first became part of Russia in the 1700s.

On March 18 in a formal [speech](#) to the Russian Federation, Putin justified Crimea’s desire to escape the control of the coup regime in Kiev, saying: “Those who opposed the [Feb. 22] coup were immediately threatened with repression. Naturally, the first in line here was Crimea, the Russian-speaking Crimea. In view of this, the residents of Crimea and Sevastopol turned to Russia for help in defending their rights and lives, in preventing the events that were unfolding and are still underway in Kiev, Donetsk, Kharkov and other Ukrainian cities.

“Naturally, we could not leave this plea unheeded; we could not abandon Crimea and its residents in distress. This would have been betrayal on our part.”

Again, Putin was not claiming that the Russian government had no involvement in Crimea. He was, in contrast, confirming that it was involved. He continued:

“First, we had to help create conditions so that the residents of Crimea for the first time in history were able to peacefully express their free will regarding their own future. However, what do we hear from our colleagues in Western Europe and North America? They say we are violating norms of international law. Firstly, it’s a good thing that they at least remember that there exists such a thing as international law – better late than never.

“Secondly, and most importantly – what exactly are we violating? True, the President of the Russian Federation [Putin] received permission from the Upper House of Parliament to use the Armed Forces in Ukraine. However, strictly speaking, nobody has acted on this permission yet. Russia’s Armed Forces never entered Crimea; they were there already in line with an international agreement.

“True, we did enhance our forces there; however – this is something I would like everyone to hear and know – we did not exceed the personnel limit of our Armed Forces in Crimea, which is set at 25,000, because there was no need to do so.”

However, several weeks later, when Putin reiterated these same points, saying that Russian

troops were in Crimea in support of the Crimean people's right to have a referendum on secession from Ukraine, the New York Times and other U.S. publications began claiming that he had reversed himself and had previously hidden the Russian troop involvement in Crimea.

That was simply bad reporting, which now gets repeated whenever the Times mentions Putin's denial of Russian troops in eastern Ukraine. Clearly, there is nothing "similar" between Putin's previous statements about Crimea and his current ones about eastern Ukraine.

Beyond sloppy reporting, however, something arguably worse is playing out here, since this distortion fits with the pattern of anti-Russian bias and anti-Putin prejudice that has pervaded the "news" coverage at the Times and other major U.S. media outlets.

Rather than show some independence and professionalism, the Times and the rest of the MSM have marched in lock-step with the propaganda pronouncements emanating from the U.S. State Department.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, America's Stolen Narrative, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). For a limited time, you also can order Robert Parry's trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes America's Stolen Narrative. For details on this offer, [click here](#).

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