

Australian Labor Party holds state funeral for global Ukrainian fascist leader

Oscar Grenfell
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The Labor administration of Victoria, working with the federal Labor government, held a state funeral in Melbourne last Friday for Stefan Romaniw, who died suddenly in Poland on June 26. Romaniw was hailed as a longtime leader of the Ukrainian-Australian community, who had for many years also served on government-appointed “multicultural” advisory boards and panels.

Romaniw was much more than that, however. He dedicated his entire life to advancing far-right Ukrainian nationalism and was a devotee of the Ukrainian forces that collaborated with the Nazis in World War II. From 2009–2022, Romaniw was the global leader of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists-Bandera (OUN-B), the international network directly established by these war criminals to further their fascist project.

A state funeral is a rare honor, and Romaniw’s was not a low-key affair. Victorian Labor Premier Jacinta Allan spoke, while former Liberal-National Prime Minister Tony Abbott and other senior political figures were in attendance.

Prominent government minister and former Labor leader Bill Shorten conveyed the condolences of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese. Shorten then delivered his own tribute, extraordinary both for its effusive praise and for acknowledging the intimate connection between Romaniw, a man whom most people had never heard of, and the federal government.

Shorten declared: “In recent days, I’ve glimpsed his imposing presence, even felt I’ve seen his face in the crowds of the airport. But it’s not him... Perhaps in grief, we have a mixture of wishful thinking. We still seek his wise counsel. The urge is still there to seek the vague approval from the charismatic leader.”

Romaniw was not championed despite his rotten politics, but because of them. That was made clear by the decision of Allan and Shorten to speak alongside Oleh Medunytzia, a right-wing Ukrainian politician who is the current head of the OUN-B.

The episode, which has received no media scrutiny whatsoever, is highly revealing. It recalls what occurred in Canada last September when Yaroslav Hunka, a 98-year-old Ukrainian veteran of Adolf Hitler’s Waffen SS, was invited to the national parliament and given a standing ovation.

As with the fawning over Hunka, a man directly implicated in the Nazi Holocaust, the tributes to Romaniw can only be understood in the context of the eruption of imperialist war globally. In particular, the US and all of its allies, including Canada and Australia, are promoting and bringing forward fascist forces as part of Washington’s proxy war against Russia in Ukraine.

American imperialism provoked the Putin regime’s reactionary invasion, and is using it to pursue long-standing plans for a direct conflict with Moscow, aimed at breaking up Russia and securing its natural resources, in preparation for an even greater war against China. These war aims parallel those of the Nazi war of extermination against the Soviet Union, and are making use of the same Ukrainian nationalist forces who aided Hitler’s project.

That figures such as Hunka and Romaniw are on hand points to the decades-long cultivation by the Western imperialist powers of fascistic Eastern European forces, dating back to the Cold War.

A devotee of Stepan Bandera and Yaroslav Stetsko

It is in the nature of secretive fascistic networks, especially those sanitised by the imperialist powers, that Romaniw’s publicly available biography, at least in English, is sketchy. Born in Melbourne in 1955, his parents, a Ukrainian and a German, had emigrated to Australia in the aftermath of World War II. It is not clear whether Romaniw’s parents had been politically active, but that was a time when the federal government and immigration authorities were welcoming large numbers of Eastern European fascists.

Romaniw was reportedly active in the Ukrainian Youth Association from an early age, from which he was recruited into the OUN-B.

Founded in 1929, the OUN was a typical interwar European fascist organisation, based on ethnic Ukrainian nationalism, intense antisemitism, other forms of racism and hostility to the internationalist perspective that had led to the 1917 Russian Revolution of the working class. The WSWWS has previously reviewed in detail the reactionary record of the OUN and its collaboration with Nazi war crimes, including here, here and here.

The organisation viewed Hitler’s war against the Soviet Union as its own. As with all Ukrainian nationalist formations in history, the OUN was dependent on the patronage of an imperialist power. But this was not simply a marriage of convenience, with the OUN sharing the rabid anticommunism and antisemitism of the Nazis and developing its own fascistic ideology, associated with a virulent form of Christianity and the glorification of the more rural west of the country.

The organisation split in 1940, along largely tactical lines, with the OUN-B led by Stepan Bandera, around whom a Führer cult was established, and Yaroslav Stetsko. The OUN-B carried out pogroms against minorities, including Jews, whom it identified with communism, and Poles. It established armed battalions, coordinating with the Nazis for them to act as a forward fighting force of Operation Barbarossa, the June 1941 invasion of the Soviet Union. The Nazis were welcomed into Ukraine by both factions of the OUN, which participated in mass killings of Jews and other horrific war crimes.

The OUN-B leaders declared a new fascist Ukrainian state, with Stetsko reading a proclamation appointing Bandera as its leader and pledging that the new entity would “work closely with the National-Socialist Greater Germany, under the leadership of its leader Adolf Hitler which is forming a new order in Europe and the world and is helping the Ukrainian People to free itself from Moscovite occupation.”

The Nazis scuttled these plans and placed OUN-B leaders in a form of

soft detention. OUN-B organised battalions, including the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, would continue fighting with the Nazis, and were involved in further crimes including massacres of Jews and Poles.

Stetsko, under detention, would produce a document which stated: “Moscow and Jewry are Ukraine’s greatest enemies and bearers of corrupting Bolshevik international ideas. I fully appreciate the undeniably harmful and hostile role of the Jews, who are helping Moscow to enslave Ukraine ... I therefore support the destruction of the Jews and the expedience of bringing German methods of exterminating Jewry to Ukraine.”

This was every bit as fascistic as the Nazis.

In the aftermath of World War II and the German defeat, the OUN-B leaders turned to the western imperialist powers, rebranding as democratic fighters against the “totalitarian” Soviet Union, but without ever fundamentally altering their fascist program. Bandera was assassinated by Soviet agents in 1959. Stetsko remained active for decades more, leading the OUN-B from 1968 until his death in 1986, as well as overseeing the Anti-Bolshevik Bloc of Nations, a network of fascists and anticommunists from across Eastern Europe and the Baltic states.

When Stetsko died, his closest associates and followers gathered in Berlin. Stefan Romaniw was among them and spoke on behalf of the Ukrainian Youth Association. Romaniw, hailed as an inspiration and a “charismatic leader” by Bill Shorten and the Australian Labor Party, made clear that his own “charismatic leader” was the old Nazi, whose torch he would carry forward.

“Standing at this graveside, we make this sacred promise,” Romaniw declared. “You, our unforgettable friend, are leaving behind people of the younger generation who aspire to accomplish your unfulfilled earthly mission. I bid you farewell, our dead Leader, in the name of Ukrainian youth.” Romaniw was 31-years-old at the time and had evidently been active in high-level Ukrainian fascist politics for some years.

A fascist agent of imperialism in Ukraine

Twenty-three years later, in 2009, Romaniw was appointed the global leader of the OUN-B. Underlining the significance of Romaniw’s ascension and his central place in the Banderite scene, only seven people had preceded him as leader of the OUN-B since its founding in 1940. They included Bandera himself, his close associate Stepan Lenkavskiy—who was directly implicated in WWII pogroms of Jews—Stetsko and Stetsko’s wife.

Romaniw’s tenure coincided with a massive expansion of the decades-long drive by American imperialism to exploit the final betrayal of the Stalinist bureaucracy, the 1991 dissolution of the Soviet Union, to directly subjugate Russia.

Romaniw was the international Banderite leader when Ukraine was transformed into a frontline state in this war drive. There is no question that, as his heroes functioned as de facto agents of Nazi Germany, Romaniw served as a de facto or direct agent of US and allied imperialism.

His activities in this period were not subjected to any scrutiny in the Australian or English-language press and so only a fragmentary record is available. An independent antifascist researcher Moss Robeson has reported on the Banderite network internationally. The following makes use of material he has published on his blog and on X/Twitter.

Footage from 2012 shows Romaniw smiling and nodding approval as he sits in the front row at the national conference of the Svoboda party. The gathering was addressed by Svoboda leader Oleh Tyahnybok. He joined Svoboda in 2004, having been expelled from his previous party for giving

a speech at the gravesite of OUN-linked WWII fighters, whom he hailed as having fought the “Moscovites” and “Jews and other scum who wanted to take away our Ukrainian state.” Over the following years, Tyahnybok would repeatedly call for official investigations into the “criminal activities of organized Jewry in Ukraine.”

A key turning point came in late 2013 and early 2014. The democratically-elected government of President Viktor Yanukovych refused to sign a free trade agreement with the European Union and instead pursued greater economic ties with Russia.

Amid an escalating US drive against Russia and China, this decision produced a frenzy within the imperialist powers. Their response was to orchestrate a regime change operation, involving the deployment of top-level US officials and the promotion of a “Euromaidan” movement against Yanukovych. The shock troops of this effort were provided by Svoboda and linked organisations, such as the fascistic Right Sector.

Photos from this period show Romaniw on the ground, participating in the Maidan events, together with other senior Banderite émigrés. They were no doubt involved in unleashing the carnage that would include violent clashes, repeated sieges of the national parliament and a coup that removed Yanukovych.

Significantly, Romaniw appears in a photograph with Tyahnybok at around this time. Tyahnybok was playing a central role in the coup, appearing alongside US Congressman John McCain and other US officials, before eventually being given an audience with then US Vice President Joe Biden.

The coup and the installation of a more pliant US-oriented government resulted in a civil war, with eastern sections of the country with large Russian populations rejecting the new Kiev regime. The far-right and Banderite parties, despite generally polling in the single digits, furnished the shock troops used by the Kiev government for the civil war and to repress domestic opposition. Romaniw seems to have travelled frequently to Ukraine, holding “Bandera readings,” promoting the ideas of his fascist heroes, as well as to Germany, the US and other western countries.

US intervention escalated dramatically in the latter half of 2021, including moves to integrate Ukraine into NATO, breaching red lines laid down by the Putin regime. The deliberate aim was to provoke Putin’s reactionary February 2022 invasion as the means of setting in motion a direct conflict with Russia.

Australia fully supported these moves and has now provided more than a billion dollars in military aid to the Ukrainian regime. When Albanese visited Ukraine in July 2022, announcing military support, he was personally accompanied by Romaniw. At the time, Romaniw was still the leader of the OUN-B. That underscores the fact that Albanese and the other imperialist leaders fuelling the conflict were fully aware of the fascistic forces upon which the Kiev government was based.

Romaniw appears to have been back and forth to Ukraine throughout the war. Obituaries in the official press noted that he died in Warsaw, but few indicated what he was doing in the region.

In fact, the old OUN leader had been in Kanaus, Lithuania, for the inaugural meeting of the “Anti-imperial Block of Nations,” to which he was elected vice president. The organisation is modelled on Stetsko’s “Anti-Bolshevik Bloc of Nations.”

An article on the Ukrainian World Congress website favourably stated: “Among the attendees were representatives from the Ukrainian World Congress and leaders from the national liberation movements of Tatarstan, Ichkeria, Bashkortostan, Kalmyk Oirat, Cherkessia, Erzyan-Mastor, Buryatia, Karelia, and other regions.”

Most of those places are in Russia. The gathering had discussed the possibility of Ukraine functioning as a hub or launching pad for movements in these regions. Given the reactionary nature of these separatist formations, often based on ethnicity and religion, and the authoritarian character of the Russian regime, there is every reason to

suspect Romaniw was rubbing shoulders with figures and organisations planning terrorist attacks within Russia. That dovetails with the Biden administration's backing for Ukrainian strikes inside Russian territory and the entire perspective of the imperialist war drive, which is to break up Russia.

Conclusion

Romaniw clearly did not emerge from nowhere. It should be noted that Stetsko himself visited Australia in 1957 and 1964, holding high-level political discussions, and that even decades later, revelations of Eastern European Nazi collaborators were covered over, with hardly anyone being brought to justice.

An element of the promotion of Romaniw was the political establishment's depiction of him as a benign "community leader." Both Labor and Coalition governments, at the state and federal level, installed the old Banderite in a series of senior positions related to "multicultural" affairs. Given the OUN's explicit racism, this can only be described as an exercise in massive political cynicism.

The tributes to Romaniw are a warning to the working class. The drive to imperialist war means a revival of all the worst forms of capitalist barbarism, including the elevation of fascistic forces, who will be used both to prosecute war aims and to suppress widespread opposition.

Finally, it should be noted that Romaniw's state funeral coincided with a stepped-up campaign, branding all opposition to the US- and Australian-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza as antisemitism. While they are threatening left-wing protesters opposing the mass murder of Palestinians, the Labor leaders are glorifying the legacy of an individual who for his entire adult life was associated with an organisation directly implicated in the Holocaust.



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