

An interview with anti-fascist blogger Moss Robeson

On the history of Washington's ties to the Ukrainian Banderites and their role in the war against Russia

Clara Weiss

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Moss Robeson is a young independent researcher in New York City who has run a prominent blog, "Bandera Lobby," about the history and contemporary political role of the movement associated with the Ukrainian Nazi collaborator Stepan Bandera. He has documented the ties of both the Republican and Democratic parties to the Ukrainian Banderites and neo-Nazis and their role in the Ukrainian state apparatus and military. The WSWs recently spoke with him about his research.

Clara Weiss: Your blog, "Bandera Lobby," has been covering extensively the role of neo-Nazis within the Ukrainian state and armies, as well as their ties to the political establishment in the US and other NATO countries and the Ukrainian far right. What motivated you to initiate this blog and conduct this research?

Moss Robeson: I first got interested in this issue of Ukrainian Nazis back in 2014. That eventually led me down this rabbit hole, which became more of a historical research project about the history of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) in the United States. It wasn't until 2019 that I realized that the OUN and in particular the Banderite faction, the OUN-B still exists.

Funny enough, I was living in New Paltz, New York, and as it turned out, the oldest Bandera monument in the world that I know of was located on the other side of the mountains outside my window in Ellenville, New York, which is where they have their main summer camp in the United States. That realization led me to go from being an amateur historian to an amateur journalist overnight. They largely use the same front groups, so having researched this network as it existed during the Cold War it was pretty simple to connect the dots to what is going on today.

I started the blog in 2020. Grzegorz Rossoli?ski-Liebe's biography of Bandera which came out in 2014 does mention that the OUN-B still exists. But given the fact that no one else was covering this I felt an obligation that I couldn't let go of it once I started writing about it. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, I've started to pay more attention to the neo-Nazis in Ukraine, especially the Azov movement.

I don't have any professional training as a historian, journalist or academic. It's kind of scandalous that I should be the person doing this. But journalists will not touch the subject. There has been a lot of groundbreaking work on the history of the OUN and their role in the Holocaust in the past decade or so. A lot of the leading historians on that issue Grzegorz Rossoli?ski-Liebe, John-Paul Himka and Per Anders Rudling, all discovered that the OUN still exists, if only because when they published their research, these Banderites came after them. To those who doubt this is real and think that this is some kind of conspiracy theory cooked up in the Kremlin—there are a number of top historians who can

testify to the fact that the OUN-B still exists and remains a force to be reckoned with.

CW: When Rossoli?ski-Liebe tried to present his biography in Ukraine back in 2012, he was attacked by the OUN and had to hold his event, barricaded behind the German embassy. To his credit, he still publicly speaks about the crimes of Bandera. However, I think what we are confronted with now is that this layer of academics, including many who have done very important work, have adapted themselves to the war propaganda. That explains your own position.

MR: Yes, I don't have a job to lose. I think they're all to some extent concerned about being labeled as responsible for giving validity to Russian propaganda. John-Paul Himka's book on the OUN and the Holocaust, the first scholarly book of its kind, came out in 2021, just a few months before the invasion, which is really awkward timing. And Rossoli?ski-Liebe's book came out in 2014. The ones who were outside the German embassy in 2012 when he presented his book were from the Svoboda party, a straight-up neo-fascist party with its fair share of neo-Nazis.

I came across some evidence that the international OUN-B played a role in mobilizing Ukrainian nationalists against Rossoli?ski-Liebe that year. In Germany too they tried to organize a boycott. They had an international OUN-B conference in Munich that year and organized a new umbrella organization, the Association of Ukrainian Organizations in Germany. I'm sure this was high up on their agenda—to put pressure on Rossoli?ski-Liebe. In 2012, their "commandment" of the year (from the OUN's "Decalogue of Ukrainian Nationalists") was to "Remember the great days of our struggle for liberation." This meant to fight for "historical truth" but really to repress it. In Sweden, they wrote letters to Per Anders Rudling's university [Lund University], accusing him of inciting hatred against Ukrainians. That came from the Canadian Conference in Support of Ukraine, which is literally a coalition of OUN-B front groups in Canada. Also, in 2012, Himka was disinvited from a conference by the Ukrainian Jewish Encounter in Canada. The chairman of this organization is a Ukrainian-Canadian philanthropist, James Temerty, who personally disinvited Himka after the Ukrainian nationalists pressured him to do so. They've waged a war on this small group of historians doing this important work, and I think it's had a chilling effect.

CW: I agree that there is fear of the fascists. But it is not only that. The New York Times now regularly cites Ukrainian neo-Nazis as "sources of information." If it was just a bunch of Nazis going after you as a historian, that's one thing, but this is the official line at this point. But this only makes it all the more important to speak up. You cannot oppose this war or the Putin regime from a principled standpoint without an

understanding of that history. We have been opponents of the Russian invasion from the beginning, and we completely reject the lie that Putin is supposedly fighting against neo-Nazis in Ukraine. There's no way to oppose this war or the Putin regime, for that matter, if you celebrate as heroes people who are actually mass murderers. So it's a very troubling tendency among historians. I'm convinced that if historians would actually speak up and turn to the public to educate it, they would find an audience.

MR: I spoke at a conference in Berlin last year that was organized by Junge Welt, and we had hoped to get one of these historians or someone else of their caliber for the first presentation. We could not find anybody, so I had to do it myself. It was fine, but I am not a historian. It would have been a lot more powerful if we had had a credentialed scholar.

CW: *Can you speak more about the glorification of Bandera in the US? How does it play into the way the war in Ukraine is being covered?*

It is ironic that, historically, the CIA did not want to work with Bandera. At first they chose to work with this faction of Banderites who had abandoned Bandera after the war and claimed to have been “reformed” and “seen the light of Western democracy” and so forth. In the 1950s the CIA engineered a coup within the OUN-B. By the late 1950s, they had had some success in marginalizing Bandera. Then, the KGB assassinated him to make it look like a suicide, but they messed up and instead turned him into this martyr. On the other hand, while they found Bandera troublesome and internally labeled him a fascist, the CIA whitewashed the OUN and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) to justify its collaboration with “former” Banderites. So, of course, he and his legacy benefitted from that. By the end of the Cold War, the glorification of Bandera was really normalized in the Ukrainian diaspora.

The OUN-B itself took over much of the organized Ukrainian diaspora. For example, at the Ukrainian Congress Committee of America they staged a coup in 1980, just before the Reagan administration came in. That's when I think the glorification of Bandera in the US probably reached its peak. In 1981, Yaroslav Stetsko, at that time the leader of the OUN-B, was invited to come to Washington to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the so-called renewal of Ukrainian statehood on June 30, 1941, when Stetsko himself declared this pro-Nazi government in Western Ukraine. After that, the OUN-B spearheaded a massive series of pogroms in Western Ukraine. A Congressman, Alfonse D'Amato from Long Island, sponsored a resolution calling on the United States to officially recognize this anniversary. Stetsko and his wife, Slava Stetsko, were welcomed to Capitol Hill. Tip O'Neill, the Democratic Speaker of the House at the time, was there with them. They had more allies among the Republicans, but there was a bipartisan group that welcomed them to Washington D.C. In 1982, there was an anniversary at Capitol Hill to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (although it was really created in 1943). And then in 1983, to celebrate the 25th annual Captive Nations' Week, the Stetskos once again came back to Washington to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Anti-Bolshevik Bloc of Nations. For that, Stetsko got to shake hands with Ronald Reagan, George Bush and the UN Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick. This was a huge PR victory for them. The normalization of this [in the US] was a very important prerequisite for the normalization of neo-Nazis in Ukraine.

I'd like to make a distinction between the Banderites and Ukrainian Nationalists more generally and the hard-core neo-Nazis in Ukraine. For example, the Banderites tend to come from Western Ukraine, and the Azov movement comes from Kharkiv and consists largely of Russian speakers. While the Banderites are Christian nationalists, Azov has a lot of neo-Pagans. A big part of their Pagan beliefs is that Ukraine is the real Aryan homeland. But when the Nazis are put on the spot, they say, “Oh, we're just Nationalists.” The Banderites won that fight for them. To glorify the Nazi collaborators from the OUN and UPA was normalized so the Nazis in a way stand on the shoulders of the Banderites. The OUN-B

itself, their most important contribution to the ongoing conflict was ideological, whereas the neo-Nazis play very important roles in the military. The Banderites aren't on the front lines of the real war, but they're on the front lines of the memory war/information war. They infiltrated, in particular, the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory, infiltrated the Ukrainian Ministry of Education, and they took over the archives of the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU). They have a very specific agenda, and they're kind of doing their own thing, whereas Azov is doing its own thing. But you probably couldn't have one without the other.

I see 2014 as ushering in an era of what you might call the “Banderization of Ukraine” and 2022, contrary to what Putin said about “de-Nazifying Ukraine,” was the start of the Nazification of Ukraine. Azov and Bandera reached a point where you cannot question their status as heroes of Ukraine.

CW: *Can you be more specific about the role that the Banderites and neo-Nazis are now playing in the Ukrainian state apparatus?*

MR: I don't think Ukraine is a Nazi state, but I do think that looking back, it will be clear that 2022 was the start of this process or at least a critical stage. The Nazis have reached really important roles in the military. A lot of the most elite units are neo-Nazi units or completely infested with these individuals. The OUN-B are mostly memory warriors. Since 2019, the OUN-B spearheaded the “Capitulation Resistance movement,” which was just one group of the “No capitulation movement” led by Azov. But the “Capitulation Resistance movement” was essentially an OUN-B front. One of its leaders, Andriy Yusov, is now a spokesperson for the chief of Ukraine's military intelligence, Kirill Budanov. There's actually a video of Yusov, the day of the Odessa Massacre in 2014, giving orders to people to march on the anti-Maidan camp.

There's something called “UNITED 24 media,” which was created by the Ministry of Digital Transformation. The head of that ministry is Mykhailo Fedorov, who's a very important person in Zelensky's inner circle. They made a video about the military's “top five super units”—three of them were from Azov, and one of the others was the “Da Vinci Wolves,” which is now closely linked to another splinter group from Azov, “Honor.” That's coming from the Ukrainian government itself, that the Nazis are the elite of the military. That will obviously have consequences. People will often point to the fact that the Nazis and Azov, in particular, don't do well in elections. I think that could change when and if Ukraine ever does have an election again. This war is the best thing that's ever happened to the Nazis in Ukraine, for sure.

CW: *Azov already ran summer camps for children before the war began. I don't think that you can really discuss the problem of Ukrainian fascism outside the question of the crimes of Stalinism which have led to an immense disorientation in the working class. At the same time, I certainly don't think that the working class is the principal base of the Nazis. Our Comrade Bogdan Syrotiuk, who is now imprisoned, wrote a very interesting article about how the OUN terrorized the Ukrainian civilian population in the civil war that followed the defeat of the Nazis in 1945. They went after everyone they considered their political enemy, and they're doing the same thing today. There's also a parallel here to what is happening internationally: This promotion of fascism is coming from the top. We're not talking about an organic movement of Brownshirts from below. They're being armed with NATO weapons and promoted at the highest level of the government. And that is extremely dangerous.*

MR: Neo-Nazis around the world will, of course, benefit from the normalization of Azov's Nazi symbols. I remember there was a video released by the Ron DeSantis campaign where there was a Sonnenrad [Sun Wheel] spinning in the background. There was rightfully outrage about that, but what do you expect if we're arming units in Ukraine that use the same symbol? It's going to blow back on us. I know there are some connections between American and Ukrainian neo-Nazis. Maybe

not as much as people feared there would be. But in the long term, they'll all benefit from this, for sure.

CW: *Can you speak about the ties of the Democratic Party to these tendencies?*

MR: During the DNC, the “United ethnic women for Harris,” a group within the DNC, had a party at this Ukrainian Cultural Center in Chicago which at least used to have a Bandera portrait in the conference room. In the Illinois division of that group, the Banderites play a very important role. Their leader in Chicago, Pavlo Bandriwsky, is the local vice president for the Ukrainian Congress Committee of America, and he's responsible for government relations. In January 2023, Antony Blinken paid a visit to the Ukrainian community in Chicago at this same Cultural Center, and there's a picture where he's sitting right next to Bandriwsky, whose code name in the OUN-B is allegedly “The Strategist.” In any case, there's no doubt that he's an important OUN-B member in the United States.

Historically, the Ukrainian nationalists were much more closely linked to the Republican Party. But they've long had allies in the Democratic Party as well. For example, the Levin family dynasty in Michigan. There was Andy Levin, until recently a congressman, and so was his father, Sandy Levin, and Carl Levin, who was in the Senate. They've all had close relationships with the Banderites, personal friendships. Andy Levin, the youngest, around the time that Russia invaded Ukraine, said that Borys Potapenko taught him everything he knows about Ukraine. Well, Potapenko is literally the head of the international coordinating body of OUN-B front groups.

I think the ties with the Republican Party are probably still more direct. In 2020, there was a Ukrainian Americans for Biden, affiliated with the DNC, and there was a Ukrainians for Trump, affiliated with the RNC. Ukrainian Americans for Biden had at least two or three Banderites involved. One of the advisers was a very important OUN-B member, Askold Lozynskyj, who engineered this coup that the Banderites did of the Ukrainian Congress Committee of America in 1980. On the other hand, Ukrainians for Trump was essentially an OUN-B front. The group behind it was called the Suburban Council for Voters in Illinois, which was tied to the hip of the local branch of an OUN-B front group. The Banderites are split—some vote Republican, some Democrat—but they tend to feel more at home in the Republican Party.

CW: *The Democrats are not a fascist party, but they're playing a critical role in legitimizing the fascists, both in the United States and in Ukraine. In the US, the legitimization of Ukrainian fascism has been historically closely linked to the rehabilitation of fascism and fascist conceptions more broadly. As you noted, the 1980s were a turning point. That was also when the “Holodomor,” a narrative of the Ukrainian Nazi collaborators, was accepted. At the same time, during the Historikerstreit in Germany, Ernst Nolte sought to justify the crimes of the Nazi regime.*

MR: The Banderites have played a very important role in pushing this narrative of the Holodomor, not just as a genocide, but one that was worse than the Holocaust. They push that it had 7-10 million if not more victims. Stefan Romaniw, who just died this summer in Australia, was the leader of the OUN-B worldwide, from 2009 to 2022, and since the mid-2000s he was the international coordinator for Holodomor awareness for the Ukrainian World Congress. In that capacity, he worked very closely with the Yushchenko government and the foreign ministry and security services of Ukraine to push this propaganda. That's another example of their role on the front lines of the memory wars.

CW: *This raises the question of the strategy pursued by the Ukrainian government and the US in the war against Russia. They advocate now, as they did in the Cold War, the carve-up of the former Soviet Union. Russia today is of course not the Soviet Union anymore, but there is a continuity in terms of the objectives being pursued by the imperialist powers and the fascists. In a recent piece on your blog about the campaign to “decolonize*

Russia”—a buzzword among academics—you document how the dismemberment of Russia has been central to the plans of the Ukrainian far right for a “Greater Ukraine.” Can you speak more about this?

MR: The Banderites tend not to be as open about their ambitions for a greater Ukraine as they are about breaking up Russia. But, of course, they hope that this would be to the benefit of Ukraine expanding its territory. The Banderites have always co-opted the language of decolonization and anti-imperialism when they talk about this. I mentioned earlier that they had this organization, the Anti-Bolshevik Bloc of Nations (ABN), which was created in 1946. I'd like to quote the description of this from Scott and John Lee Anderson from *Inside the League*, their book about the World Anti-Communist League. They described it as “the largest and most important umbrella for former Nazi collaborators in the world.” It had its roots in 1943 in a conference in Ukraine, but when the OUN-B had its first conference in 1941 they already outlined this whole vision, including what became the slogan of the ABN, “Freedom for the nation and individual” —sounds nice, but ... It's been alleged that Alfred Rosenberg, an ideologue of Nazi Germany and the head of the Reich Ministry for Occupied Territories, played a role in this conference. I'm not so sure about that, but an official from his Ministry, Gerhard Von Mende, did play an important role in the expansion of the ABN. By 1950, there were components of the ABN which stemmed from the so-called national committees that were set up within Alfred Rosenberg's ministry. Rosenberg wasn't a fan of the OUN, but they essentially had the same vision of breaking up Russia, and the Banderites have never let go of this extreme dream.

You could say that the grandfather of this vision was Mykola Mikhnovsky, who also coined the slogan “Ukraine for Ukrainians.” So this idea of expanding Ukraine went hand in hand with purging it of Poles and Jews and others. Today, a lot of the contemporary leaders of the OUN-B network in the Ukrainian diaspora are maybe 70 years old and a lot of them cut their teeth politically in an organization called the “Ukrainian Student Association of Mikhnovsky.” That's one way in which they helped keep alive this fascist fantasy of theirs. When Yaroslav Stetsko died, they had on paper a government-in-exile, stemming from this declaration he had made in 1941. Stetsko's successor as the head of this “Ukrainian state board” was a guy from Michigan, Bohdan Fedorak, a mentor to Borys Potapenko. Fedorak had to resign from the Ukrainians for Bush campaign after it came out that he was an important OUN-B member. He himself wrote in the 1990s about this “Greater Ukraine” project.

Since Russia invaded Ukraine, one of the priorities for the OUN has been to re-activate the ABN, which was dissolved in 1996. They recreated it as the Anti-Imperial Bloc of Nations. Through this project, they have been much more explicit about the goal of breaking up Russia and in the process potentially expanding Ukraine's borders. The idea of Greater Ukraine is so improbable that they don't talk about it so much, but there has been a broader movement of promoting this goal of breaking up Russia, and the Banderites have been quite involved in that. There's something called the “Post-Russia Forum.” One of the coordinators of that is from an organization called “Free Idel-Ural,” this landlocked region in Russia. The “Free Idel-Ural” organization has ties to the OUN-B which I've written about. The “Idel Ural” committee within the ABN was an example of a group that stemmed from Alfred Rosenberg's ministry. So there is a straight line you can draw from this idea back to Nazi Germany. That shared vision is one of the reasons why the Banderites wanted to fight alongside the Nazis.

CW: *The NATO-backed Russian oppositionist Ilya Ponomaryov has also been involved in that Forum. They have a map of a broken up Russia on their website.*

MR: Yes. Alongside these Russian units fighting for Ukraine, there's also a lesser known unit called the “Siberian Battalion,” which allegedly

has taken in a bunch of anarchists. The OUN-B has done some fundraising for that unit. They are trying to support that project which seems to be overseen by the Ukrainian military intelligence. The Ukrainian military intelligence has its own international legion. That includes a lot of these far-right units that were doing these incursions into Russia, and Budanov, of course, had that map of a partitioned Russia [hanging in his office]. It seems clear to me that he is the one at the top of this project. If I'm not mistaken, Budanov gave his first interview when he became intelligence chief to an outfit of OUN-B members. There are various signs to me that the OUN-B has a relationship with Budanov's office, which seems to be the most involved in pushing these maximalist goals about breaking up Russia.

CW: *You have endorsed the campaign to free our Comrade Bogdan Syrotyuk, noting on Twitter/X, that for his views "you get canceled" in the US, "but at least I don't have to worry about the FBI and Nazis breaking down my door...!" How do you view the attack on free speech and the political climate in the US, especially since the beginning of the war in Ukraine?*

MR: I personally have no fear that I'm going to be jailed or assaulted by Ukrainian nationalists. I do worry about the future if the situation in Ukraine deteriorates, and history starts to repeat itself and the Nazis end up fleeing to America. If we have a bunch of Azov guys relocating to the US, I would be a lot more scared. We're seeing the beginning of a new McCarthy era on this subject. The second "red scare" was largely triggered by this fear mongering over the "loss of China," and the "loss of Ukraine" could spark a similar hysteria. The worse the situation is for Ukraine once the war ends, the greater the witch-hunt will be to scapegoat people allegedly responsible in the US. Ukrainian nationalists might go after people like us, accuse us of being Russian propagandists. Maybe the US government might even start to crack down on us as Russian propagandists. But I think it's much less serious than the repression of free speech when it comes to opposing the genocide in Gaza. Maybe one day there will be more of a parity, but I feel more comfortable speaking about the climate around Ukraine.

CW: *I wouldn't put it that way. The repression over Gaza has been more overt because the political and ideological confusion over Ukraine has been so intense. With the invasion of Ukraine, the Putin regime made a tremendous gift to the imperialist powers. They had provoked it, they wanted it, and then it created a lot of confusion, certainly in Ukraine and Russia, but also in the US and Europe. Obviously, most people are opposed to the invasion, but then the question is from what standpoint do you oppose it and how do you understand the history of this war?*

There actually has been a real witch-hunt in the arts. Anna Netrebko, for instance, was fired from the Met even though she opposed the invasion, simply for not caving in to the political demands that she condemn Putin. The climate created in academia and the media has been extremely difficult, and there's been a complete silence on what is really happening. With the Gaza genocide, more people understand more clearly what is happening. The Israeli government openly says "we're perpetrating genocide," and the US government is openly backing it. What has changed is that we've seen the beginnings of a mass anti-war movement, which we did not have over the war in Ukraine. There simply were no mass protests then. And the ruling class is so terrified that the protests against the Gaza genocide could spread to the working class and raise other issues, such as the war in Ukraine, that they feel compelled to respond with an extremely aggressive crackdown on democratic rights. But both the war in Ukraine and the genocide are part of an emerging world war. They cannot really be separated.

MR: These are very good points. The Banderites throughout the Cold War were very explicit that, in their view, World War Three was an inevitability. They're not necessarily the ones dragging us into World War III today, but they have played a very important role in getting us this

far. I guess I feel that if only people did speak up more, especially in academia, about these subjects, it would be a very different situation. The war in Ukraine is like a house of cards. There are all these Nazis; a Ukrainian military victory is a complete fantasy. But once they did speak up, yes, there probably would be much more repression. I don't feel any fear in this regard, but perhaps that's because I'm not in academia.

CW: *That certainly helps explain why you are doing this work, which has been extremely important. Thank you very much for the interview.*

MR: Thank you. I first came across the WSWS in college about 10 years ago, and I've seen a lot of really great stuff there, and I know I probably should read more.



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