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Full Comment

Leonid Bershidsky: Chrystia Freeland's dismissal of her family's Nazi connection is

only helping Russia's propagandists

The minister's dismissive attitude about her grandfather's past will inevitably be taken as evidence that she, too, would have worked with the Nazis

Bloomberg View

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Chrystia Freeland's Ukrainian grandfather Michael Chomiak at a party – he is to the right of the man smoking. In the right, lower corner of the photo in uniform is Emil Gassner, the Nazi administrator in charge of the press for the region including Cracow.

Last week, Canadian Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland opened a can of worms by dismissing references to her family's World War II history as Russian disinformation. That wasn't entirely true, and in the current climate, history is politics.

Freeland was banned from entering Russia for her fiercely pro-Ukraine stand. When she became foreign minister in January, Moscow refused to lift the ban. Soon, the story of her maternal grandfather, Michael

(Mykhailo) Chomiak, was circulating on pro-Russian websites.

Broadly, the story is true. The known facts were laid out by the independent U.S. investigative site Consortium News at the end of February. During World War II, Chomiak, a Ukrainian nationalist, edited a newspaper called Krakivski Visti — first in the Nazi-held Polish city of Krakow, then in Vienna — that ran articles praising Hitler and his appointees in occupied Eastern Europe and denouncing Jews.

According to family lore, Chomiak helped anti-Nazi resistance forces by helping their fighters get German papers. When the war ended, Chomiak was in Germany; it took him some time to move his family to Canada.

Asked about Chomiak last week, Freeland batted away the question, saying “I don’t think it’s a secret. American officials have publicly said, and even Angela Merkel has publicly said, that there were efforts on the Russian side to destabilize Western

democracies, and I think it shouldn't come as a surprise if these same efforts were used against Canada."

AP Photo/Andrew Harnik

The awkward dodge elicited a spectrum of responses from the Canadian media. “So much for Russian disinformation,” David Pugliese wrote for the Ottawa Citizen after reviewing the evidence. “No coherent allotment of blame and absolution is possible,” Paul Wells argued in the Toronto Star, adding that the survival history of Freeland’s family did not detract from her “important work” to prevent history from repeating itself.

The underlying issue, however, is more fundamental than the nature of Russian propaganda (which can only be effective if it's grounded, to some extent, in truth) or the moral murk of the terrain Timothy Snyder, a historian sympathetic to the Ukrainian cause, called the Bloodlands. For the Kremlin — and for many Russians — the current conflict with Ukraine is, in a way, an extension of that war. It's more than a propaganda argument: Russia's

claim of a moral right to interfere depends on this interpretation.

Any sign of historic betrayal is fair game. Long before Freeland's grandfather got their attention, pro-Russian sites alleged that the father of Oleksandr Turchynov, Ukraine's acting president after the 2014 "Revolution of Dignity," served as a private in a German army unit. Stories of the annual torchlit marches in Kiev to commemorate Stepan Bandera, a Ukrainian nationalist who

collaborated with the Nazis for a period, play big in the Russian press. So do stories featuring the Azov Regiment of the Ukrainian National Guard, staffed with ultranationalists and using a Nazi symbol on its emblem. Like Poland, Russia has noted a Ukrainian law bestowing hero status on the 1940s nationalist organizations that worked closely with the Nazis and are known to have unleashed genocide on Poles and Jews.

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For Russians, their country's role in the Nazis' defeat has long been the cornerstone of national pride. For more than seven decades, World War II history has been taught in schools in an uncompromising, back-and-white light. Nazi collaborators are

still seen as the ultimate criminals, regardless of their motives. It's not a nuanced view. So Freeland's dismissive attitude about her grandfather's past will inevitably be taken as evidence that she, too, would have worked with the Nazis if they were active today — and that explains her support for the current Ukrainian government.

One way to deal with that is to dodge the issue as Freeland did, saying, in effect, that if certain information is

being spread by Kremlin-friendly outlets, it's not worthy of attention. That doesn't tend to help matters. A more fruitful approach would be to discuss the story openly and without reservation, as John-Paul Himka, a retired history professor at the University of Alberta and Freeland's uncle, did in his academic work. He did his best to remain objective as he unpicked the ethnic resentments that ran wild in 1940s Ukraine. He didn't pretend that a richer context exculpated the Nazi collaborators.

Understanding that context, however, de-mythologizes World War II; that's necessary to finally lay it to rest.

Freeland can't be responsible for her grandfather. There would be no dishonour for her in talking about his role in the Nazi propaganda effort and the compromises Ukrainian nationalists made with Nazis at the time. The history of Ukrainian nationalism is hardly rosy. Today's Ukrainian leaders attempt to fashion it into a heroic past in much the same

way as Putin's Russia continues the Soviet tradition of ignoring the Stalin-era crimes that helped the Bloodlands earn that name. It's conceivable that the grandfathers of the Russians now accusing Freeland of going too easy on her ancestors committed far more serious crimes than newspaperman Michael Chomiak.

Unlike Russia and Ukraine, however, Canada should have no propaganda axe to grind. It's the West's role to

talk honestly about an era that is gone and a war that has long been over. That might help prompt a reassessment of the current official version of history in Ukraine, which could only be beneficial for Ukraine's budding European identity.

Depoliticizing discussion of World War II may eventually mean Russians, too, will start questioning their self-righteousness — a necessary condition for a less aggressive foreign policy stance.

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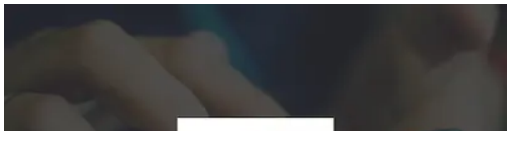

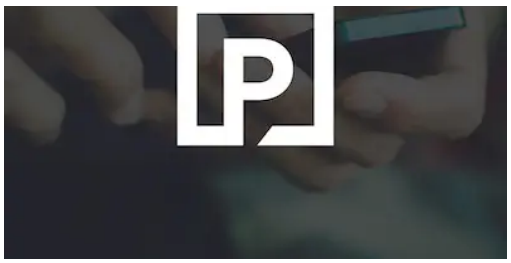

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