

Black Ribbon Day (BRD): Canada's top Cold War propaganda export

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Thinking of my grandparents Mykhailo & Aleksandra Chomiak on Black Ribbon Day. They were forever grateful to Canada for giving them refuge and they worked hard to return freedom and democracy to Ukraine. I am proud to honour their memory today. #BlackRibbonDay

The global Black Ribbon Day (BRD) crusade was spawned in 1985 by East European émigré groups in Toronto whose founders and leaders included Nazi collaborators and Holocaust perpetrators. BRD propaganda continues to smear the USSR with a Nazi brush by spreading disinformation about the Soviet-German nonaggression treaty of August 23, 1939. By exploiting the West's ongoing Cold War phobias, BRD portrays Nazism and communism as diabolical twins. As BRD founder Markus Hess said in 1986, this treaty was "the high point in the evil of these two tyrannical regimes."¹ This narrative even goes so far as to claim that Nazism and communism must take equal blame for causing WWII.

The émigré groups that spread BRD across Canada and the globe were linked to pro-fascist networks like the Anti-Bolshevik Bloc of Nations, the World AntiCommunist League and the CIA-funded "Captive Nations" movement. Their efforts were soon joined by far-right lobby groups, mainstream politicians at all levels of government, and their likeminded mass media allies who eagerly joined the fray.

BRD has now spread globally and August 23 is has been officially memorialized in the US, Australia and Europe. In 2009, Canadian MPs unanimously affirmed BRD. Introduced by then-Liberal leader Bob Rae, the motion was co-authored by Estonian-Canadian Marcus Kolga of the Central and Eastern European Council.² Since then, BRD laws—falsely equating the world's most avidly-opposed, mortal enemies—have been passed in Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Georgia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Slovenia.

Black Ribbon Day (2014), published by the Research Institute of the Canadian Polish Congress (CPC), heaps sycophantic praise on the far-right movement that built this fervently anticommunist campaign. The book's author, Edward Soltys, was the Institute's president (1995-2011) and a CPC director (1997-2002).

Calling the CPC "the most noteworthy Polish Canadian antiCommunist bloc," Polish-Canadian historian Patryk Polec says it opposed



Canada's leftwing Polish groups. When 55,000 Poles with "a strong aversion to Communism" entered Canada (1945-52), he said, they "invigorated" the CPC, "transformed the Polish-Canadian community" and "lobbied the Canadian government to oppose Communism in Poland."³ As Zophia de Witt, longtime CPC-Manitoba president said: "Being communist is the worst sin that you could commit."⁴

Not surprisingly, the CPC has received \$988,000 in government grants, and three of its member groups received \$510,000 in 2018.⁵

BRD was the creation of Markus Hess, a Canadian of German-Estonian heritage. His preface to Soltys' book details how he began BRD in 1985 by pitching his idea to Canada's Toronto-based Estonian Central Council (ECC). Neither Hess nor Soltys mention that the ECC was founded and led by Nazi collaborators including former officers of Estonia's Waffen SS. Neither did they reveal the many other fascist-links to émigré groups behind BRD's success.

The Hess plan was to unite all "Captive Nations" groups by using an annual protest to focus public attention

on antiSoviet fears and the Cold War loathing of communism. As a symbol, he picked the black ribbon of mourning. Once elected to the ECC's board, Hess presented his plan to the group's annual meeting which gave BRD its full blessing and support.⁶

As chair of ECC's BRD committee, Hess "extend[ed]... the protest to all other enslaved [Soviet] peoples"⁷ by attending the Jan.-1986 meeting of Canada's Cttee. of Captive European Nations. There he met leaders of three groups linked to Nazi collaborators: the ECC, the Lithuanian Canadian Community and the Latvian National Federation in Canada (LNAK) (pp. 34-37 and 38-39.) Wanting to fuel protest and animosity against their Soviet enemy, the Captive Nations Cttee. embraced Hess' plan. Their alliance, aka the Group of Seven (G7), united far-right East Europeans from Czechoslovakia (Czechs and Slovaks), Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine.

The BRD crusade got its next big break after Hess met Yaroslav Sokolyk at an ECC-Toronto event in Feb. 1986. Sokolyk was then

president of Ukrainian Canadian Congress-Toronto. It was hosting a meeting the next day of the World Congress of Free Ukrainians (WCFU). Hess spoke there and got their "vote of support" for BRD.⁸ The WCFU, now the Ukrainian World Congress, leads the global diaspora that reveres WWII fascist leader Stepan Bandera with cult-like adoration. By joining the BRD committee Sokolyk threw the weight of this worldwide movement behind the cause.

Bandera's faction of Ukrainian nationalists is still the strongest of Canada's government-supported East European émigré groups. By the 1980s, Banderites had long been a leading force in the fight against socialists in their communities, and in support of Canada's US/NATO-led, antiSoviet foreign policies. Dominated by those who had welcomed the Nazis as liberators in WWII, these émigré groups embraced Hess plan and were its driving force. "With their collaboration," says Soltys, "Hess idea moved forward with lightning speed."⁹

Source: *ABN Correspondence*, May-Jun. 1987. (ABN = Anti-Bolshevik Bloc of Nations)



ABN President Slava Stetsko with M. Hess and D. Somerville of the Black Ribbon Day Committee at the ABN offices in Munich

Besides "collaboration" from the groups cited above, Soltys notes many others that were key to pushed the BRD cause. These included:

- Canadian Slovak League and Slovak World Congress (pp.40-43)
- Czechoslovak National Assoc. of Canada and Council of Free Czechoslovakia (pp.44-45)
- Estonian Central Council Canada (pp.28-31)
- Estonian World Council (pp.32-33)
- Latvian National Federation Canada (pp.38-39)
- World Fed. of Free Latvians (WFFL) (p.39)
- Lithuanian Canadian Community and the Lithuanian World Community (pp.34-37)

Each of Canada's so-called Captive-Nations groups supplied volunteers to the BRD cause. Soltys details how these groups used their member lists, publications, radio and TV shows, meetings, public events and contacts with government, media and financiers to push the BRD agenda. They also sent delegates to BRD meetings. As a result, the G7 soon disbanded and was replaced by the BRD committee which took lead of Canada's Captive Nations movement. LNAK's president, Linard

Lukks, who had led the G7, became secretary-treasurer of the International BRD Committee.¹⁰

Hess notes that at the first BRD meeting, delegates from G7 émigré groups decided to “reach outside of our communities.” To achieve this they used the National Citizens’ Coalition (NCC). With 40,000 members, it was one of Canada’s most formidable, far-right forces. (Stephen Harper later became its president, 1998-2002.) Hess arranged to meet NCC vice president David Somerville, and he became what Hess called his “brother in arms.” Somerville contributed what Hess called his “knowledge, ... vision and strategies,” and the “NCC’s generosity with regards to office space and assistance.” This support spread BRD beyond its hardcore East European base. When Somerville suggested that August 23 be the BRD’s focal point, Hess says he made “an immediate executive decision and agreed.”¹¹ In his introduction to Soltys’ book, Somerville explains that before his meeting with Hess he had

a revelation ... to use the public’s preexisting *revulsion* for the Nazis to get them to feel similarly toward the Soviet Communists.... [I]n condemning both regimes simultaneously, it would be impossible for critics to attack us as right wing extremists or possible Nazi sympathizers.¹² (Emphasis added)

To spread public “revulsion” against the Soviets, Hess and Somerville began an “organizational campaign” tour to the UK, Germany, Austria, France, Sweden and the Netherlands. This tour, says Hess, was funded by Stefan Roman.¹³ As Canada’s “Uranium King” billionaire, Roman was a lead force in the Canadian Slovak League and the Slovak World Congress, which glorified Slovakia’s Nazi puppet regime. During their tour, Hess and Somerville were welcomed by such leading profascists as Slava Stetsko, who met them at the Anti-Bolshevik Bloc of Nations’ (ABN) global HQ in Munich.¹⁴ (See photo, opposite.) Stetsko led the ABN, was an executive of the World AntiCommunist League and headed the Banderite Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists. While in Munich, Hess and Somerville also broadcast “interviews at Radio Free Europe [RFE] into the Soviet Union regarding Black Ribbon Day.”¹⁵ (RFE was the CIA’s largest Cold War propaganda mill.)

In 1986, the once-tiny BRD project spread wildly with “anti-Soviet rallies in the US, Australia, Sweden, France and Britain,” and in “at least nine Canadian cities.” At Toronto’s rally, thousands were addressed by Conservative MP and former Mayor David Crombie. Canada’s BRD protests also had government support through PM Brian Mulroney whose warm greetings were read out to the anti-Soviet protesters across Canada. That year, the BRD group also produced \$40,000 worth of TV ads (i.e., \$83,000 in 2020) to equate the Soviets with Nazism. In response, the USSR,

The late Cold War context of the BRD crusade

Black Ribbon Day (BRD) arose in the heyday of President Ronald Reagan, a former B-movie actor who had been the smiling PR frontman for nuclear-weapons maker GE (1954-62) and for the CIA’s antiRed “Crusade for Freedom” propaganda campaign administered by Radio Free Europe (1950-60).

In his role as America’s “Great Communicator,” Reagan followed his script in 1983 to brand the USSR as the “evil empire.” Using his hokey, homespun style to spread vile hate speech against socialism, he was a vibrant symbol of the West’s most aggressive anti-Soviet policies. Reagan was, for example, infamous for arming rightwing paramilitaries. But in Cold War parlance, these terrorists were “freedom fighters” struggling to stop the Third World spread of communism. Subsidized by smuggling cocaine and heroin, these CIA proxy armies killed thousands of innocents in covert US wars that crushed fledgling leftwing governments from Nicaragua to Afghanistan.

Reagan’s anticommunist thugs were glorified by East European émigré groups that had long revered their own “freedom fighting” predecessors who allied with the Nazis in WWII. In 1986, as the Iran-contra affair hit the news, speakers for the Afghan *mujahideen* and Nicaraguan *contras* attended a global conference of the Anti-Bolshevik Bloc of Nations (ABN) in Toronto. These and other CIA-backed “freedom fighters” were on the front-line of the West’s Cold War crusade.

which had lost 27 million citizens to defeat Nazi Germany, issued an all-but-ignored media release titled “Hate Propaganda Day Sullies Canada.” It correctly denounced BRD as “a blatantly dishonest anti-Soviet propaganda exercise.” As mainstream journalist John Best reported: “From all indications, not least the outraged response from the Soviets, Black Ribbon Day was a huge success in its first year.”¹⁶

The swift realization of Hess’ BRD dream proves that myth building can be “a huge success” if, as a tool for pushing official narratives, it is supported by politicians, the mass media and state-supported groups—even if they include those with close organizational and ideological connections to Nazi collaborators.

References and notes

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2. Adu Raudkivi, “Introducing the Central and East European Council,” *Eesti Elu (Estonian Life)*, Dec. 30, 2009. bit.ly/CEEC2009
3. Patryk Polec, “The Polish Canadian Communist Movement, 1918-1948,” 2014, pp.17, 180. bit.ly/PPolec
4. Chris Clements, “Voluntary Ethnic Groups and the Cdn. Polish Congress’ Role in Cold War Ca-

Brzezinski, “*The Spirit of the Time*” and the Canadian Polish Congress

While Reagan is most closely associated with arming Afghan and *contra* terrorists, it was Democrat president Jimmy Carter who began their CIA funding. Carter’s strategy was engineered by Zbigniew Brzezinski, a Polish American from Warsaw who grew up in Montréal. His father, Tadeusz Brzezinski, a veteran of Poland’s antiSoviet War (1919-20), was a diplomat in Poland’s anticommunist/anti-semitic government (1921-45) and its consul general in Montréal during WWII. After the war, when communists came to power in Poland, the Brzezinskis—like 55,000 other antiSoviet Poles—made Canada their home. In Montréal, Tadeusz became president of the far-right Canadian Polish Congress, CPC (1952-62).¹

His son Zbigniew, with a BA (1949) and MA (1950)² from McGill, replaced Henry Kissinger as US National Security Advisor (1977-81) and spearheaded Carter’s use of terrorists to promote US interests. In July 1979, Brzezinski began the Carter CIA’s multibillion dollar funding of Afghan *mujahideen*. After six months of their attacks on the Afghan socialist government, the USSR agreed to defend Afghans from CIA-backed terrorists. Brzezinski also pushed US funding of Nicaragua’s *contras*, Jonas Savimbi’s UNITA terrorists (fighting Angola’s Marxist government), and far-right, anti-Soviet “dissidents” in Eastern Europe. More recently, he backed the Prague Declaration.

Brzezinski inspired a new generation

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- nada,” *Oral History Forum*, 35, 2015, p.5. bit.ly/CPCsin
5. Public Accounts Canada (1995, ‘97, ‘98, ‘04). Plus, three CPC member groups in Alberta (Polish-Canadian Society, Polish Veterans Society and Polish Combatants Assoc. #6, Edm.) received \$510,000 in 2018. (Figures adjusted for inflation)
 6. Markus Hess, “Some Memories,” in Edward Soltys, *Black Ribbon Day*, 2014, pp.16-29.
 7. Markus Hess, “Black Ribbon Day Memories,” *Culture & Life*, Sum. 2011. (trans) bit.ly/HessBRD
 8. Soltys, *op. cit.*, pp. pp.19-20.
 9. *Ibid.*, pp.116-17.
 10. *Ibid.*, p.19. Lukks was G7 pres. (late ‘70s-early ‘80s); LNAK pres. (‘70s-‘80s); Baltic Federation of Canada’s vice pres. (mid ‘70s); and World Federation of Free Latvians pres. (late ‘80s.)
 11. *Ibid.*, pp.20-21.
 12. David Somerville, “Truths we must relearn,” Soltys, *ibid.*, p.32.
 13. Hess 2014, *ibid.*, pp.23.
 14. *ABN Correspondence*, May-Jun. 1987, p.3. bit.ly/ABN-BRD [See photo, at left, with bust of Nazi collaborator, Roman Shukhevych (p.51)]
 15. Hess 2014, *op. cit.*
 16. John Best, “Black Ribbon Day likely to be permanent fixture,” *Star Phoenix*, Sep. 3, 1986, p.4. bit.ly/ABN-86