

2019-37 Michalchyshyn vs Ottawa Citizen

May 16 2019

The National NewsMedia Council has considered and dismissed a complaint about the use of sources in a February 25, 2019, column in the Ottawa Citizen, “Nazi whitewash gathers momentum as history of the Holocaust fades”.

The article described efforts by some governments to whitewash their respective countries’ involvement with the Nazis by glorifying their military members as nationalistic heroes. It also argued against a recent report from the Macdonald-Laurier Institute that criticized the journalist and his reporting as spreading disinformation.

The complainant, Ihor Michalchyshyn, took issue with three specific aspects of the article. He argued that the use of a photo and caption inaccurately identified soldiers as Ukrainian; that the article is part of an ongoing trend of hateful articles and attempts to characterize the Ukrainian community as Nazi sympathizers; and that the article's use of a letter signed by members of U.S. Congress mischaracterized the incidence of anti-Semitism in Ukraine.

The article relied on photos and other material to support its argument, including a historical photo and caption that identified the individuals in the photo as “Ukrainian SS Soldiers.”

The complainant argued that the article’s caption inaccurately identified the soldiers. He stated that another source identified the soldiers in the same photo as “Askaris” without specifying the nationality of the individuals.

Readily researched definitions of “Askari” state the term includes Ukrainian soldiers who served under various circumstances, whether volunteers, Red Army deserters, recruits or soldier-prisoners who volunteered to serve the Germans

On May 30, 2018, the NNC heard a nearly identical complaint from another individual about this same photo and caption that appeared in a May 17, 2018, article by the same columnist. The May 2018 article quoted the book, *The Holocaust Chronicle*, and displayed several photos from the book, including the same photo and caption in question.

The NNC determined that the book was written and fact-checked by several academics, and that there was no indication the book was anything other than a reliable source. In that case, the NNC found no evidence that the reproduced caption was false, and no support for the allegation that the caption was misleading, mislabeled or deliberately provocative. The complaint was dismissed.

The NNC does not deal with complaints that are substantially similar to those on which it has already declined to take or issued a decision. That said, standard practice allows a journalist to choose his or her sources, and the NNC noted that, in the case of the photo and caption, the source selected is well supported by other research. For these reasons, Council dismissed this portion of the complaint.

The complainant also argued that the February 25, 2019, article was part of an ongoing trend of hateful articles and “attempts to characterize the Ukrainian community in Canada as Nazi sympathizers” by overlooking existing research and reports on anti-Semitism in Europe.

The NNC does not deal with trends in reporting, and therefore declines to comment on the allegation about hateful articles. However, it is worth noting that Council found no evidence in the February 25, 2019, article to support the view that it characterized or attempted to characterize Ukrainians in Canada as anti-Semitic.

The NNC found the complainant’s reference to a 1986 report from the Commission of Inquiry on War Criminals (also known as the Deschênes Commission) to be irrelevant.

The February 2019 article cited several sources to describe and condemn efforts to whitewash certain countries’ involvement with the Nazis. Sources cited include reports from other journalists, organizations and academics; personal emails that the journalist received from individuals who denied

the Holocaust existed; and an April 2018 letter signed by members of the United States Congress that condemned state-sponsored efforts “to glorify ‘Nazi collaborators.’”

The complainant took issue with the article’s reference to the letter from members of Congress, alleging that the contents of the letter and the article’s reference to the letter mischaracterized the level of anti-Semitism and specific incidents in Ukraine. The complainant provided other sources to dispute the claims in the letter and to show that incidence of anti-Semitism in Ukraine is instead on the decline, including reports from Israel’s Ministry of Diaspora Affairs, data from Pew Research, and a letter from the Association of Jewish Organizations and Communities of Ukraine (VAAD). While Council recognizes the ongoing political tensions, it declines to comment on political motivations.

The news organization responded by stating that reference to the letter “accurately reported facts that have been in the public realm for almost a year.”

The NNC supports the wide latitude afforded to columnists to express points of view that may be objectionable or unpopular. It is also of the view that journalistic standards apply to both columnists and reporters, including a commitment to accuracy and the prerogative to choose their own sources.

In the case of opinion writing, a columnist selects credible sources to support an argument. While readers may disagree with the argument and find other sources that refute it, it is the columnist’s prerogative to select relevant sources. In this case, the columnist relied on a number of sources to make the argument that efforts have been made to both whitewash countries’ involvement with Nazis and to discredit journalists who report on these efforts.

In the NNC’s view, the article does not condemn all Ukrainians, nor does it make any reference to the Ukrainian community in Canada. Read as a whole, the article condemns efforts to minimize and whitewash selective Nazi history. The article also highlights attempts to discredit related reporting and paint it as “fake news” or a product of “Russian disinformation.”

Although the complainant may prefer to rely on other sources, the widely available reports on this issue and the article's numerous sources, including the reference to the April 2018 letter from U.S. Congress members, support the article's condemnation of attempts to whitewash historical facts.

Council dismissed the complaint for the reasons stated and noted that further attempts to discredit the journalist in this case speak to the point of the article.