

How a War for the Past Becomes a War in the Present

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Nothing is new under the sun: whether in Soviet times, before, or after, history was used and misused in Ukraine for numerous aims and occasions. In the 19th century, Ukraine followed the classic pattern of 19th-century revivalist nationalism characteristic of stateless nations (e.g., Czechs, Slovaks, Poles, and Ukrainians). Here the absence of the state predetermined the mode of action undertaken by social agents (the intelligentsia, for instance): their aim was to liberate their nations-in-the-making from the empires in which they found themselves. Their appeal to “history” was part of the creation of the nation’s Self, the formation of national identity (in which history was construed as the nation’s memory), and the legitimization of the nation’s right to existence and its claim to statehood.¹ The nationalizing state of Ukraine after the 1990s took up this tradition but with an important twist: the state was presented as—and itself became—the commissioner of the discourse and policies. Therefore, history and historians were mobilized to perform a major task: to construct (or to reconstruct) a picture of the past that would explain the present and that would legitimize the new nation-state and its titular nation. History (which in many respects was readily and unwittingly confused with collective memory) became a part of civic education of the nationalizing state. The pattern of self-assertion after 1991 was the same as before, although the conditions were different.

The resulting version of “national” history was inevitably essentialist and culturally exclusivist in the sense that it construed the history of Ukraine as the history of ethnic Ukrainians, largely ignoring the other peoples who have inhabited the country’s terrain. Its promoters presented it as a true history and as a part of the collective memory of the Ukrainian people. The retreat to this

¹ For a more detailed account of instrumental uses of history and memory in the region and beyond, see Alexei Miller and Masha Lipman, eds., *The Convolutions of Historical Politics* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2012).

“true history” was also presented as an antithesis to the historical lethargy or amnesia imposed by Soviet rule on the Ukrainian people. It was accordingly challenged by the Soviet version of history—itsself represented as collective memory in the same manner—which retained purchase among considerable portions of Ukraine’s citizenry. Officially, that Soviet version was not banned by the state, and elements of it persisted everywhere—in school curricula, in *lieux de mémoire*, in commemoration practices. In some regions, particularly the Donbas, Crimea, and southeastern Ukraine, the Soviet version was deliberately cultivated by members of the local elite. This promotion was partly the function of their own ideological preferences and partly a way for them to preserve Soviet-style patrimonialism—the top-down relationship between protective “red directors,” top bureaucrats, and their dependents. The Soviet-nostalgic variant of history/memory was also attractive (mostly to members of the older generation) because of the excesses of “wild capitalism” and the social crisis of the 1990s, and on account of the uncertainties of the post-2008 period, which featured a new social and economic crisis. For this part of the population, the principles of cheap bread and social benefits characteristic of the Soviet past, together with memories of the great country that was victorious in the Great Patriotic War, remained a normal part of their cultural baggage.² According to a sociological survey of the Ukrainian population in 2010, 46 percent of respondents regretted the dissolution of the Soviet Union. A majority of them (55–65 percent) lived in eastern and southern Ukraine.³ Western Ukraine represented a contrasting attitude: there only 16 percent viewed the USSR’s end unfavorably.

It might be said that by the beginning of the 2000s, three major types of history/collective memory had emerged, two of which stand in direct opposition to each other. One is a national(ist) version, which emphasizes the exclusive role and position of Ukrainians in Ukrainian history. This version is based on the idea of a continuous Ukrainian history across an entire millennium. It is loaded with myths of a heroic past (early medieval Kievan Rus’, Cossackdom) and victimhood (the demolition of the Cossack state in the 18th century, the Holodomor or Great Manmade Famine of 1932–33).

² P. P. Tolochko, N. F. Kotliar, et al., *Ocherki istorii Ukrainy* (Kyiv: Kievskaiia Rus’, 2010). For a critical survey on the presence of the Soviet past in contemporary collective memory and historiography in Ukraine, see V. Kravchenko, “Boi s ten’iu: Sovetskoe proshloe v istoricheskoi pamiati sovremennogo ukrainskogo obshchestva,” parts 1 and 2, *Ab Imperio*, no. 2 (2004).

³ “46% ukrainsiv zhalkujut’ pro rozpad Radians’koho Soiuzu” (http://zaxid.net/news/showNews.do?46_ukrayintsiv_zhalkuyut_pro_rozpad_radyanskogo_soyuzu&objectId=1120869, accessed 6 October 2014).

History is presented as a continuous struggle of the Ukrainian people for freedom and statehood.⁴

The other is the Soviet-nostalgic version, which again is generally based on the idea of eternal struggle of the “people” (in the classic version of Soviet times, meaning the working class and its allies or the exploited masses) for social and national liberation, with particular emphasis on the glorious deeds of the ancestors in building a great power (the USSR, with Ukraine as an integral part of it) and in “defeating fascism” in the Great Patriotic War of 1941–45.⁵ This view is aligned with the official vision of the past promoted in Russia since the early 2000s. The myth of the great power that won the most devastating war in world history has become a constitutive basis for the new indoctrination strategies developed by Putin and his supporters.

There is, finally, a mixed and thus ambivalent version that combines elements of the first two. According to this version, pride in the national does not necessarily contradict tolerance for things Soviet.⁶ Mazepa Street in Kyiv, renamed after the prominent 18th-century Ukrainian Cossack leader who is regarded as a national (and anti-Muscovite) hero, starts in Arsenal’na Square, which is decorated with a monument glorifying the Bolshevik revolt of 1918, and ends with the Square of Glory dedicated to Soviet soldiers. Certain prominent figures of the past were easily adopted by both the nationalist and the Soviet pantheons: Bohdan Khmel’nyts’ky, Taras Shevchenko, Lesia Ukrainka. Some prominent Soviet Ukrainian celebrities included in the national heritage fund after 1991 are the football coach Valerii Lobanovskii, the surgeon Nikolai Amosov, and the opera star Anatolii Solovianenko.

In spatial terms, the national(ist) version of history was predominant in western Ukraine and part of the center, the Soviet version in the East and Crimea, and the ambivalent combination in central and to a certain extent southern Ukraine.

These versions managed to coexist in relative peace in the public sphere as long as members of the political elite limited their use and abuse of history and memory to the purely political terrain—for example, in parliament or during elections. Until recently, the appeal to history was mostly situational

⁴ The most obvious example is the 15-volume history of Ukraine published in 1998–2001 under the title “Ukraine through the Centuries,” which received the State Prize in 2001. Some volumes, however, did not match the general concept of millennial Ukrainian history.

⁵ P. T. Tron’ko, “Vnesok narodu Ukrainy v peremohu nad nimets’ko-fashists’kymy zaharbnikamy,” *Kraeznavstvo*, nos. 1–4 (2005): 87–90.

⁶ See, e.g., the textbook for secondary schools repeatedly published since the late 1990s: F. G. Turchenko, P. P. Panshenko, and S. M. Tymchenko, *Novitnia istoriia Ukrainy (1939–pochatok XXI stolittia. Pidruchnyk dlia 11 klasu serednikh navchal’nykh zakladiv*, 5th corr. and exp. ed. (Kyiv: Heneza, 2006).

and spontaneous in political struggles, and the wider public was not invited to take part in the discussion. The public perceived the conflict mostly as a clash between retrograde Communists and radical nationalists. As these represented comparatively small minorities, the rest of the community remained mostly spectators of these debates, immobile in their regions.

After the Orange Revolution, however, the situation radically changed. On the one hand, Viktor Yushchenko and his political allies undertook a massive effort to come to terms with the totalitarian past through an international and national campaign to recognize the Holodomor as an act of genocide against the Ukrainian people. The elimination of Soviet monuments and other sites of memory dedicated to those who were now blamed for organization of the Great Famine of 1932–33 became part of this campaign. Concurrently, Yushchenko did his best to enhance the politics of ethno-symbolism in the realm of collective memory and history with the goal of strengthening Ukrainian ethnic identity.

On the other hand, local economic and political elites from eastern Ukraine, gathered in the Party of Regions, discovered their own interest in using and abusing history in a revanchist spirit after the lost presidential elections of 2004. Communists, who formed a political alliance with them, gladly supported their interpretation and supplied relevant verbiage. They regarded Yushchenko's efforts to intensify the nationalization of history (particularly by glorifying the nationalist movement and resistance of the 1930s–50s) as a nationalist drive and as a violation of the Russian and Russian-speaking population. Yushchenko's opponents regarded his efforts to overcome the totalitarian legacy in the realm of collective memory as an infringement on the sacred and glorious past. The Party of Regions and its supporters combined the Soviet "anti-nationalist" mythology borrowed from the arsenal of the Communist Party of Soviet times with extensive references to the glorious and comfortable Soviet past, which they offered as an antithesis to an objectionable present, for which they blamed extreme nationalists and "fascists." In a remarkable development, anti-Yushchenko billboards in Donetsk in 2004 portrayed Yushchenko in a Nazi uniform. Meanwhile, anti-Orange propaganda was generously larded with terms coined by Soviet propaganda in the 1940s–50s, the period of the struggle against "bourgeois nationalism." In October 2005, veterans of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) who gathered to commemorate the foundation date of this partisan formation were attacked by "unknown" young people wholeheartedly supported by the veterans of the Soviet Army who gathered nearby for counteraction. The attackers were not, shall we say, determined to overcome

fascists. In 2011, the Ukrainian parliament, controlled by Yanukovich, passed legislation that allowed public use of the Red Flag (as a symbol of the Great Victory) on Victory Day (9 May)—a decision that immediately provoked physical clashes between supporters of the idea and its opponents, mostly in western Ukraine—“unknown young people” were always present at the right place and time.

Not surprisingly, progovernment marches organized by the Communists and the Party of Regions in the spring of 2013 in major Ukrainian cities, including Kyiv, took place under antifascist slogans. Talking heads and spin doctors loyal to Yanukovich readily branded the democratic opposition as fascists—either calling attention to the presence of right-wing nationalists in the opposition ranks or simply invoking this term as a convenient and easily recognizable label.

Around 2005–6, Ukrainian Communists and the Party of Regions acquired a powerful new ally: Vladimir Putin. During at least three public speeches, Putin identified the dissolution of the Soviet Union as the greatest tragedy of the 20th century; this slogan resonated with nostalgic moods and attitudes cultivated in eastern Ukraine and Crimea. Since 2007, Russia has launched an unprecedented information campaign against Yushchenko’s politics of history, accompanied by a diplomatic war aimed at blocking Yushchenko’s efforts to promote the Holodomor/Great Famine of 1932–33 at the level of international organizations (the United Nations, UNESCO, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe) as a genocide against Ukrainians. Russian state-controlled television was overloaded with broadcasts covering the “feast of nationalism” in Ukraine. The struggle against “bourgeois Ukrainian nationalism,” an important part of Soviet propaganda for decades in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, returned in the 2000s in the form of a protest against the “violation of the rights of the Russian population of Ukraine.” This struggle is part of the ideology of a Russian world (*Russkii mir*) and the policy of “protecting the rights of compatriots” in the “near abroad.” Major Russian television channels (RTR-Planeta, Rossiia 24, NTV Mir, 1 Kanal) have dominated the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine, and the antinationalist drive was thereby exported to these territories, where local lords matched them with their own strategies aimed at discrediting the “nationalists” and “fascists” in Kyiv and western Ukraine. Numerous soap opera serials were devoted to the attractions of the Great Victory of 1945, which the Russian political leadership has made a foundation of the politics of memory/history in contemporary Russia.

Yushchenko's own politics of history and his persistent emphasis on anti-Muscovite aspects of the past have invested these antinationalist efforts with a good deal of credibility in the minds of those who readily consented to the promotion of the Soviet variant of history. In 2007, Yushchenko conferred the title of "Hero of Ukraine" on the commander in chief of the UPA, Roman Shukhevych. Soviet propaganda had labeled Shukhevych a Nazi collaborator; in Poland he is believed to be responsible for massacres of the Polish civil population in Volhynia in 1943; and in Israel people blame him for the extermination of Jews in western Ukraine. In 2010, Yushchenko conferred the same title on Stepan Bandera, the chief of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), the *enfant terrible* of Soviet antinationalist propaganda. Yushchenko's other efforts in the realm of memory politics—the glorification of the battle of Konotop in 1659 as a great victory of Ukrainians over Russians, the commemoration of the Baturin tragedy of 1708 (the destruction of the Cossack Hetmanate capital, Baturin, and persecution of the civilian population by the troops of Peter the Great), the battle of Poltava in 1709 (the defeat of Charles XII and loss of the autonomy of Ukrainian lands), the Kruty tragedy of 1918 (the heroic sacrifice of Kyivan students in the fight against Bolsheviks from Moscow)—all these efforts were regarded by his opponents as nationalist propaganda (in Ukraine) and as policies aimed at driving a wedge between brotherly peoples (in Russia).

A veritable war of monuments merely heightened the confrontation. Thus a cult of Bandera in western Ukraine, where no fewer than 40 new monuments and memorial sites appeared between 2007 and 2010, was answered by the erection of monuments dedicated to the victims of Ukrainian nationalist terror (in Luhans'k and Simferopol'), while vandalism against monuments of Soviet times (particularly against statues of Lenin) became prominent in central Ukraine. The war of monuments reached its limit at the end of 2010, when activists of the nationalist organization S. Bandera Tryzub (Trident) beheaded a statue of Stalin erected by local Communists in Zaporizhzhia, then blew up a restored version of the monument. The Maidan revolution of 2013–14 has opened a new page in the monument war by promoting massive iconoclasm: from February to October 2014, more than 300 monuments of Lenin have been destroyed or removed in central and southern Ukraine.⁷

The war over the past has become an integral part of the war in the present. The Maidan revolution made extensive use of references to the glorious Cossack past and to the victimhood and glory of the nationalist Ukrainian Insurgent Army of the 1940s. The slogan of Ukrainian nationalists

⁷ "Pamiatniki Leninu, snesennye na Ukraine s fevralia 2014 goda (spisok, fotografii)" (<http://leninstatues.ru/leninopad>, accessed 10 November 2014).

in the 1930s–40s, “Glory to Ukraine! Glory to the heroes!” has unexpectedly become the slogan of Maidan protesters, although this time it refers to those who struggled against the Yanukovich regime and for the freedom of Ukrainians. The other side refers to the glory of their fathers who struggled against fascism and writes “To Kiev!” on their tanks, just as their fathers wrote “To Berlin!” on their vehicles in 1945. One side struggles against eternal Russian imperialism and expansionism in Ukraine, embodied in the figure of Putin, whereas the other battles “fascists” or *banderivtsi* supposedly backed by U.S. imperialism. Both sides are ready to sacrifice their own and others’ lives to eliminate the enemy and ensure the victory of historical justice.

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