



*Dieter Segert (Ed.)*  
**Civic Education and  
Democratisation in the Eastern  
Partnership Countries**

Paula Borowska

This article first appeared in *BelarusDigest*, November 2014. Retrieved December 2, 2015 from <http://belarusdigest.com/story/non-formal-education-belarus-unleashing-civil-society-potential-20186>

Paula Borowska is an analyst at the Ostrogorski Centre in Minsk.

Andrii Portnov

## The “Great Patriotic War” in the politics of memory in Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine

In the late 1960s, the “Great Patriotic War of the Soviet people against the German-Fascist invaders” virtually replaced the “Great October Socialist Revolution” as the founding myth of the Soviet Union. Since 1965, Victory Day – May 9 – has been an official public holiday. Also during that period, the Hero City honorary title was established, the memorial medal was issued, and large museum complexes dedicated to the war began to spring up across the USSR. In particular, the Brest Fortress, which in the summer of 1941 was defended by the Red Army against the Wehrmacht, became an iconic site in Belarus; in Soviet Ukraine, the Hero City title was awarded to Kyiv, Odessa and Sevastopol. Numerous literary works and films (many of them masterpieces) created an exemplary picture of the war with appropriate highlights and omissions. The sacralisation of the victory, inextricably linked to the pride of the country, also served to legitimise the Soviet regime and the ruling Communist Party.

At the same time, the official memory of the war not only pushed into the background, but in fact suppressed local memories. The official memory had no place for the Holocaust and the Porajmos of the Sinti and Roma (who, as a matter of principle, were lumped together with other ‘peaceful victims’ of the Third Reich and its allies), let alone the deportation of dozens of ethnic groups carried out by the Soviet authorities in 1944. The other themes for which this memory’s repertoire had no place included a discussion of “the price of victory”, i.e. the Soviet military commanders’ treatment of ordinary soldiers’ lives, and the Red Army’s misdeeds in liberated Europe, the numerous aspects of the life under occupation, or the persecutions in the formerly occupied territories after the Soviets’ return.

At the same time, the role and influence of the Second World War on the development of post-Soviet nations have not been limited solely to the powerful Soviet ideological dogma. Modern Europe, including its eastern part, is to a large degree a geopolitical, cultural and economic product of

the Second World War. In particular, the territories of present-day Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine were completely occupied by the Nazis. The post-war redrawing of the borders and “population transfers” (the latter euphemism is undoubtedly a gloss for the practices that can be best described as “ethnic cleansing”), the experience of restoring Soviet rule, as well as the acts of persecution carried out by the Soviet authorities, exercise a palpable influence on these nations’ development until today.

The breakup of the Soviet Union, which was caused both by the fast-paced disintegration processes in the centre and the emancipatory drive in the republics, presented a series of difficult challenges to each of the post-Soviet nations. One of these challenges was the necessity of creating a new ideology of the state, a new blueprint of history suitable for legitimising the post-Soviet political order. The different nations responded to these challenges differently, depending on the domestic and geopolitical situation, the sizes of ethnic and religious groups, as well as the degree of willingness and sense of responsibility among specific political forces and actors. One of the puzzles which was hardest to tackle in the area of what began to be called “the politics of memory” at the turn of the 21st century was the myth of the Great Patriotic War, inherited from the USSR.

## Belarus

The military history of Belarus has an important characteristic: the republic had practically no nationalist underground groups which resisted the Soviets. On the contrary, the guerrilla warfare, which was conducted on a fairly large scale in the wake of the Battle of Stalingrad, was mythologised after the war as being “nationwide” and reflected in the metaphor of “Partisan Belarus” (*Belarus partizanskaia*)<sup>1</sup>. In the post-Soviet period, the absence of social groups with a full-blown memory of the war which differed from the Soviet narrative translated into poorly fertilised soil for a pluralistic historical narrative. Nevertheless, a specific local memory of the war could be noticed, especially in the Polish-speaking communities in western Belarus<sup>2</sup>.

However, the first textbooks of Belarusian history published in early 1992 were a product of serious efforts to re-conceptualise the Soviet imagery of the war. In particular, the textbooks referenced the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact concluded in 1939, pioneered the term “World War II” (which was used more often than the “Great Patriotic War”) while not using even once such phrases as “Soviet people”, gave some consideration to the Soviet leadership’s missteps and faults, no longer mentioned the Communist Par-

ty’s “leading role” in organizing the resistance movement, replaced the term “nationwide struggle” with the term “mass struggle”, and also mentioned for the first time incidents of looting and violence against civilians committed by the Soviet guerrilla fighters (Tykhomirov, 2004).<sup>3</sup>

Almost immediately after Alexander Lukashenko came to power in 1994 (since which time he has been doing nothing more than legitimising his self-appointment to the presidential post through formal elections, while suppressing the opposition<sup>4</sup>), the Soviet symbols were put back into use as the Republic of Belarus’s official symbols, and a decision was made to remove the new Belarusian history textbooks from high schools, replacing them with the Soviet ones. However, since by that time the Soviet textbooks simply could not be found in sufficient quantities, the replacement was not carried out before 1996-1997.

The textbook published in 2000 basically recycled the Soviet mythologems about the “reunification” of Belarus in 1939 (which in effect meant the consequences of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the invasion of Poland by the German and Soviet armies in September 1939) and widely used the terms “Great Patriotic War” and “nationwide struggle”. At the same time, unlike its Soviet cousin, the new textbook referred to the “Great Patriotic War” as a part of “World War II”, thus signalling the adaptation of the discourse to post-Soviet realities.

The steps undertaken by the government in the run-up to the 60th anniversary of the victory (which ranged from pardons to the creation of new “places of memory”) included the decision to introduce a course called “The Great Patriotic War of the Soviet people (within the context of the Second World War)” at all Belarusian educational establishments (from schools to universities). This is a mandatory course in every academic programme at institutions of higher learning, whereas at secondary schools it is taught as a separate discipline, incorporated into the course on the history of Belarus (since 2008, when the history of Belarus was abolished as a separate academic course, it has been incorporated into the general history course)<sup>5</sup>.

President Lukashenko made the most of the 60th anniversary of the victory in order to legitimise his regime, and unequivocally placed the Second World War at the centre of the state’s ideology. He called the war “the conceptual landmark of our history”, which “brought into the sharpest relief the Belarusian nation’s noble spirit, freedom-loving nature and historical wisdom”<sup>6</sup>. Playing up the Belarusians’ huge contribution to the victory over Nazism (and emphatically calling to mind in this context the three million Belarusian victims of the war), Lukashenko called Belarusians “the most internationalised nation” and remarked that at the core

“of our present achievements” was “the spirit of an unvanquished nation which, together with other nations of the Soviet Union, made the critical contribution to the cause of defending humanity against the brown plague”. The last quote is taken from the President’s welcoming address on the Independence Day, which since 1997 has been celebrated on July 4 – the day when Minsk was liberated by the Soviet Army.

The often repeated pronouncements regarding three million Belarusian victims of the war do not always correctly reflect the victims of the Shoah in Belarus. Yet it was in Minsk, and as early as 1946, that the Soviet Union’s first memorial dedicated to the mass murders of Jews was erected – on the site called “A Pit” (*Yama*), where 5,000 prisoners of the Minsk ghetto were killed in March 1942. In 2000, the memorial was renovated, and in 2008 President Lukashenko participated in a remembrance ceremony on the occasion of the 65th anniversary of the killings. However, in general, in post-Soviet Belarus the history of the Holocaust remains (as it was in its predecessor, the Soviet republic) insufficiently incorporated into the war’s general narrative.

The most noticeable and controversial commemorative event on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the “Soviet people’s victory in the Great Patriotic War” was the opening of “The Stalin Line” open-air memorial near Minsk. The memorial features several fortifications, built in 1928–1929, which did not play any significant role during World War II. The latter circumstance, as well as the fact that The Stalin Line was an unofficial name and the memorial’s creators could have easily avoided using it, led many observers to conclude that the key to the concept was precisely the figure of “the father of the people”. Officially, the initiative to create the memorial was launched by a charitable foundation, “The Memory of Afghanistan” (an organization uniting veterans of the Soviet-Afghan war in the 1980s), but the support provided by President Lukashenko was not only not concealed but instead emphasised in every possible way. The Stalin Line was opened with great ceremony on June 30, 2005. The laconic explanations on the memorial’s official site (<http://www.stalin-line.by>) are peppered with slightly modernised stock phrases from 1970s periodicals which purported “to bring up the young in the spirit of patriotism”. In particular, the site informs the reader that “the creation of the memorial was a people’s project” while “the main burden of the project was shouldered by the engineering units of the Republic of Belarus’s army”.

The Stalin Line’s administration categorise it as a museum, “a place for family leisure” and, *also*, a venue for corporate parties. The list of proposed *entertainments* (it is difficult to find another word in this context) includes

a boat trip on a lake, “a soldier’s hearty porridge” in a café called At the Halt, rides in armoured vehicles, and the opportunity “to test real weapons used in the Great Patriotic War”. Interestingly, this approach (even if its practitioners are not aware of it) is noticeably at variance with the emphatic Soviet style of sacralisation of memory and is more redolent of the omnipotence of mass culture.

As a result of the energetic efforts to publicise the “Belarusian Disneyland” (the unofficial name for The Stalin Line) through the media, this memorial essentially eclipsed other similar sites created in the Brezhnev era – the Khatyn memorial<sup>7</sup> and the Mound of Glory – just as the National Library, built several years previously, eclipsed all other buildings in Minsk. The most essential element here is the fact that the new creations are a product of the “Lukashenko era”<sup>8</sup>.

The history of the creation of the Marshal Zhukov monument in Minsk was somewhat more messy. The initial design featured a 4.5-meter long equestrian statue (the first equestrian monument in Minsk), to be mounted in front of the Officers’ Club, not far from the site where the first Soviet tank to enter into the city in 1944 stands. A certain amount of funds had been collected for the equestrian statue before the authorities, all of a sudden, claimed that the site that had been earmarked for it was a poor choice of location. While the search for a different locality was on, inflation ate up a considerable portion of the funds, and the idea of an equestrian statue died a natural death. The new design featured the marshal’s seven-meter high bust – having shrunk later to just one meter (although this one-meter high bust was mounted on a Soviet-style four-meter high base). It was unveiled with much ceremony on Zheleznodorozhnaya Street in 2007.

In 2006, schools in Belarus received the first print of a Belarus history textbook written in Russian. It was authored by Vladimir Sidortsov, who also created the 1993 textbook mentioned earlier (Smalianchuk, 2008, pp.378–381). This time around, the textbook writer, sensitive to the authorities’ changed demands, wrote up the “reunification” of 1939 as being an entirely positive event, and reinstated in the text references to the “nationwide struggle” and the Communist Party’s “leading role”. Yet the textbook, which was issued in 2006, used the terms “Holocaust” and “Ostarbeiter” for the first time, and even tried “to cautiously invoke a national discourse while maintaining the predominance of the Soviet approach” (Smalianchuk, 2008, p.381). I agree with this characteristic by Ales’ Smalianchuk, and feel it is necessary to draw attention once again to the mere fact of the *inevitable* (albeit quite fragmentary) re-formulation of the Soviet narrative in post-Soviet circumstances.

Lukashenko's logic when addressing the myth of the "Great Patriotic War" can be described as an understandable desire to use a ready-made symbolical resource, especially considering the expectations of most of his voters. What presented a much more serious challenge to his regime was the necessity of introducing conservative but meaningful changes to that myth. The new social context of the usage of the Soviet myths became the main driver for this. To give you an example of such changes, I wish to point to the discreet departure from the concept of the "Soviet people's victory" (in the President's decrees on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the end of the war) to the victory of the Belarusian people, who "together with other nations of the Soviet Union made a critical contribution ...". This is a very subtle change, which is all the more important considering the ongoing efforts to form a Belarusian political nation.

On the whole, President Lukashenko is trying to find a "middle way" in his politics of history between the national narrative (associated with the political opposition he hates) and the post-Soviet Russian narrative (in which, Lukashenko fears, Belarus may disappear).

## Moldova

The main characteristic of the politics of memory in post-Soviet Moldova is the conflict between the "Romanian" and "Moldovan" interpretations of the identity of the people living in Moldova. In other words, the question of whether the Moldovans are a separate nation (as was claimed by Soviet propaganda) or a part of the Romanian nation<sup>9</sup> inevitably acquired a hard political edge after the breakup of the USSR.

As in the other former Soviet republics, from the late 1980s to the early 1990s, an emancipatory discourse with nationalist overtones prevailed in Moldova. The parliament of what was then the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic condemned the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and its consequences, starting off the re-interpretation of history adapted to the Romanian national narrative. The important landmark events signalling these changes included the restoration of the monument to Stephen III ('Stephen the Great') in Chisinau and the removal of a large number of Lenin statues, as well as the invocation of the formula "two states – one nation". This formula was the backbone of "History of Romanians", a discipline introduced into the high school curriculum in 1990.

Incidentally, the relative ease and speed of change of the predominant paradigm can be explained by the "latent Romanisation of the Molda-

vian intelligentsia" (Kusko & Taki, 2003, p. 489), which had been in progress since the mid-1960s, and which included the gradual adaptation of the Moldavian language to Romanian literary standards by cleansing it of neologisms introduced by the communist authorities in the interwar period.

Like the politics of Stanislav Shushkevich in Belarus or Leonid Kravchuk in Ukraine, the politics of Mircea Snegur, who was president from 1991–1996 (in Moldova, unlike in Belarus or Ukraine, the nation's presidents are elected in the parliament, not by popular vote), ought to be considered as a series of situation-specific reactions to a volatile domestic and international political context rather than as a consistent politics of a "nationalising state". The post-Soviet nomenclatura flexibly used the national idea in its ethno-cultural (Romanian) form as an ideological justification for holding on to the power in the new social realities. However, a deteriorating economic situation and geopolitical uncertainty pushed the politicians in a backward direction. Already on February 5, 1994, speaking at a meeting of "Our Home Is the Republic of Moldova", Snegur brought up the concept of the "Moldovan nation", and in the country's new constitution, the principle of "two states – two nations" (Cojocari, 2007, p. 91) was clearly spelled out. 1995 saw an attempt to replace "History of Romanians" with "History of Moldova" as a school subject at high schools, which caused street protests, compelling the President to issue a decree prohibiting criticism of teaching a history of Romanians.

President Petru Lucinschi (1996–2001) continued to move in the direction of "Moldovanism" and attempted to trace the origin of post-Soviet Moldova down to the state ruled by Stephen III. Following the Communist Party's victory at the parliamentary election in 2001 projects were begun throughout the country to renovate the monuments to the "Soviet Soldiers-Liberators", the Independence Day became the Day of the Republic, and the concept of the "multi-ethnic Moldavian nation" was promoted concurrently with the marginalisation of the symbols associated with Romanian identity. In December 2001, the government decided to replace "History of Romanians" with "History of Moldova" in schools, causing three-month-long protests in Chisinau.

2001 saw post-Soviet Moldova's first major celebration of Victory Day. The statue of Stephen III was incorporated into the primarily Soviet ritual in order to highlight "the historical continuity" of Moldova's statehood (Cojocari, 2007, p. 101). In other words, in this case, too, the Soviet narrative of "sunny Moldavia" became adjusted to suit the new circumstances: some storylines were added, while others were re-interpreted.

At the level of local communities and local memories, the Soviet monuments were often “domesticated” by amending their ideological formulae. For instance, in the countryside, the red stars over Soviet soldiers’ graves were replaced (or supplemented) with Christian symbols (Cojocari, 2007, pp. 109–110)<sup>10</sup>.

In the opinion of Vladimir Solonari (2002), given the socio-cultural situation in post-Soviet Moldova, neither the communist nor the national narrative can offer a meaningful and non-antagonistic vision of Moldova’s history which would further the formation of a modern identity. The communist narrative actively plies the traditionalist and primordialist categories for self-legitimation (a good example here is the postulation of continuity between the medieval Moldovan state, Bessarabia within the Russian Empire, the Moldavian Autonomous Republic within pre-war Soviet Ukraine, and the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic, created in 1940<sup>12</sup>). Somewhat paradoxical though it is, in Moldova, the idea of the statehood’s continuity became the blueprint of a historical alternative to the idea of the Romanian nation.

In 2010, after a protracted political crisis, the majority of seats in Moldova’s parliament was won by forces supporting European integration. Soon afterwards, the Moldovan wine exporters (and winemaking is perhaps the country’s main export-oriented industry) began to have problems with Russia’s public health authorities. And on July 24, 2010, the acting president Mihai Ghimpu signed a decree establishing the Day of Soviet Occupation on June 28 – on that day mourning ceremonies were to be held and the state flags lowered across Moldova. Such a radical symbolic break with the Soviet war narrative (it was on June 28, 1940 that the Soviet troops invaded Moldova, after an ultimatum to Romania) was designed to signal Chisinau’s exit from Russia’s sphere of geopolitical influence. However, just a few days later, on July 12, Moldova’s constitutional court deemed the decree establishing the Day of Soviet Occupation unconstitutional, arguing that historical events should not be described in legal terms.

The conflict between the Moldovan and Romanian versions of history and Moldova’s identity continues, and the politics of memory with regard to the war directly depend upon it.

## Ukraine

In the Ukrainian national narrative (which has been most consistently laid out in the school textbooks since the 1990s), communism, as well as the

## The “Great Patriotic War” in the politics of memory in Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine

Russian Empire, are portrayed as *external* forces that coerced Ukraine into their orbit. Given this perspective, Ukraine, which indeed suffered a great deal from the Soviet totalitarian regime, denies its contribution to its creation and portrays itself as a victim of external aggression<sup>12</sup>.

However, completely purging the Soviet element from the legitimate image of the past proved to be an unsustainable endeavour, if we take into account the mindsets of a large section of the population (for whom ‘Soviet’ is a synonym for relative well-being, social guarantees and stability) and external pressures coming from Russia. The “Great Patriotic War” was a historical narrative that had to be incorporated, albeit partially, into the grand official narrative. The strategies chosen for such integration consisted in humanising the war’s image, refocusing attention to personal histories, heroic feats and the suffering of “ordinary people” and, at the same time, highlighting the Soviet political and military leaders’ mistakes and brutality.

Unlike in Belarus, in western Ukraine – in Galicia and Volhynia – strong anti-Soviet nationalist guerrilla groups were active until the early 1950s. The textbook authors resolved the problem of incorporating the activities of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) into the new version of the war by highlighting their struggle against the Nazis and a “democratic” evolution of the nationalist movement which presumably emerged after 1943. Meanwhile, the massacre of Poles by the UPA in Volhynia in the summer of 1943 was ignored, in which at least 60,000 Polish civilians were killed<sup>13</sup>, as was the participation of Ukrainian nationalists in the murder of Jews by the Nazis<sup>14</sup>. The new textbook claimed that the goal of ordinary Ukrainians battling on both sides of the front was independent statehood for Ukraine, and after 1991 this was intended to create conditions for reconciliation between the Soviet and UPA veterans. However, all attempts to award official war veteran status to the nationalist guerrilla fighters and to officially rehabilitate the UPA failed<sup>15</sup>.

In the early 1990s, Galicia and Volhynia experienced a wave of monument creation. The historical figure now featured on the pedestals in most cities was Stepan Bandera, the leader of the OUN’s radical wing. The name of Stepan Bandera, who was assassinated by a KGB agent in Munich in 1959, became a generic name used for Ukrainian nationalists or even all residents of western Ukraine (“banderites”, “banderas”). The post-Soviet canonisation of Bandera, geographically restricted to Galicia and Volhynia, is one of the glaring examples of an external break with the Soviet ideological dogma (which presented Bandera as being an arch-villain).

At first, the notion of the "Great Patriotic War" disappeared from school textbooks, but in 1995, after intervention by the legislators (initiated by the Communist Party of Ukraine), it was reinstated. However, the historical narrative in the textbooks did not change or revert to the Soviet dogma. Instead, this fairly monological textbook found itself in a pluralist public space where the main alternatives to the national dogma were individual elements of Soviet mythology, as well as populism and nostalgia.

The key to understanding the Ukrainian state's policies after 1992 lies in the awareness of its multitude of vectors and situational variability. The search for ways to legitimise Ukraine and its post-Soviet elites without causing national, linguistic or religious conflicts was carried out literally by touch. One can say that this approach was "conceptualised" in President Leonid Kuchma's "multi-vector" policies (1994–2004). In particular, in 2000 he officially reinstated Soviet Army Day on February 23.

In his public speeches on Victory Day on May 9, Kuchma took care not to bring up the subject of the UPA and, accordingly, the broader subject of the internal Ukrainian conflict. At the same time, the authorities tried to use the subject of the UPA's rehabilitation in ongoing political struggles. However, on May 28, 1997, the government set up a commission to study the history of the OUN and the UPA. A task force of historians created under its aegis was headed by Stanislav Kulchytsky (2005). The preliminary conclusions of the task force were published in 2000, and the final report was issued in 2005, when Kuchma was no longer president<sup>16</sup>. The historians acknowledged the radically nationalist nature of the OUN's ideology but argued that the UPA did not collaborate with the Nazis after 1943. Making a call for "the restoration of historical justice", the task force of historians recommended that the Second World War veteran title be awarded to UPA combatants<sup>17</sup>.

As the presidential election of 2004 drew nearer, the politics of symbols experienced a U-turn, acquiring a strong pro-Russian flavour, which was signalled in the Brezhnev-style parade on October 28, 2004, to mark the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Ukraine – a ceremony attended by the Russian president Vladimir Putin. The subsequent developments, historically known as the Orange Revolution of 2004, showed that these transformations caused the opposite reaction to the one that was expected.

The new president, Viktor Yushchenko, paid special attention to history. The rhetoric of his public speeches about the Second World War was dominated by a mood of reconciliation and unity of the nation. He linked the victory over fascism to statehood ("Our victory is a celebration of Ukrainian statehood"). He invoked the unity of the nation during

### The "Great Patriotic War" in the politics of memory in Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine

the war not as a means of the struggle but as a goal, claiming that millions of Ukrainians "were defending Ukraine and dying for Ukraine" (Yushchenko, 2006)<sup>18</sup>. Meanwhile, Yushchenko often paired together seemingly incompatible symbols. For instance, addressing the UPA combatants, he used the Soviet construct "Great Patriotic War" or (in order to bolster the same argument about the "unity of the Ukrainian people in the war") mentioned the general Nikolai Vatutin, killed by the UPA, and the UPA commander Roman Shukhevych, killed in battle by the Soviets, in the same breath. After the first round of the presidential election in 2010 (when he received only 5.45% of the votes), Yushchenko signed the scandalous decree awarding the Hero of Ukraine title to Stepan Bandera. This decree was soon annulled in the court of law, since the recipient of the title was not a citizen of Ukraine.

We should point to a feature of Yushchenko's public addresses which was novel compared to Kuchma's: Yushchenko mentioned the Holocaust and the deportation of Crimean Tatars by the Soviets in 1944. In his public address to mark the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the Baby Yar murders, the winner of the 2010 presidential race, Viktor Yanukovich (2011), even managed to avoid not only the words "Holocaust" and "Shoah" but even the word "Jews", mentioning only "mass murders of civilians" and the "painful death of thousands of people of different ethnic backgrounds" in Baby Yar.

Today, Baby Yar – the site of the mass murders in Kiev – demonstrates particularly clearly that the state lacks a well thought-out policy in relation to the memorialisation of the Holocaust. In 1989, memorial plaques in Hebrew and Russian were mounted at the memorial opened during the Soviet period, in 1976. During the independence years, many monuments to different groups of victims were mounted in Baby Yar (including a monument to several OUN members shot there). Presently, the "Baby Yar national reserve" features 29 different monuments, as well as playgrounds for children, vendor kiosks and other installations providing leisure facilities for Kyiv residents.

On the whole, the memorialisation of the Holocaust in Ukraine, special publications, summer schools and seminars devoted to the subject are the result of non-governmental initiatives, primarily projects run by international and local Jewish organizations. In particular, in Dnipropetrovsk, a big industrial centre in the south-east of the country, which is sometimes metaphorically called "Ukraine's Jewish capital", the construction of Europe's largest Jewish community centre, known as 'Menorah', was completed in 2012. The centre consists of skyscrapers in the form of a menorah, housing a synagogue, kosher restaurants and hotels, a hospital, and a

Museum of Jewish History and the Holocaust – the largest institution of this kind in the former USSR.

At the official level, the policies of President Yanukovich (2010–2014) included straightforward attempts to reinstate many elements of the Brezhnev-era image of the “Great Patriotic War”. In particular, he openly spoke of the need to “synchronise” the May 9th celebration with Russia and Belarus. In 2010, on Victory Day, military parades were held in Kyiv and all the Hero Cities, while the “inconvenient episodes” of the war (the nationalist underground, the fates of the Soviet prisoners of war, the deportation of the Crimean Tatars) were not mentioned at the official level. On the eve of the holiday, following an initiative of Ukraine’s Communist Party, which was a part of the ruling coalition, Stalin’s portraits were displayed in Luhansk, Soviet flags were raised in Kherson and Crimea, and a monument to the Soviet victims of the OUN and UPA was unveiled in Luhansk, as was a Stalin monument in Zaporizhia, near the Communist Party’s local office.

It is important to stress the fact that in Ukraine, where the socio-economic programmes of the various political forces are actually identical and have an undisguised populist touch, the issues of history and language have often been ideal *markers of political distinction*. The political elites, meanwhile, have regarded history as a relatively safe area where verbal and symbolic antipathy was unlikely to be translated into direct physical violence. However, the Maidan protests from the autumn of 2013 to the spring of 2014 and the war in Donbas that followed showed that it was precisely the issues of history, language and identity that formed the main ideological underpinning of the political movements and violent actions of the masses.

The political and economic situation in Ukraine before the Maidan unrest can be described as a deep crisis of sovereignty and statehood as such. On the one hand, public opinion developed an understanding of the lack of prospects for living inside an entirely corrupt economy ruled by clans and oligarchs, while on the other, it bought into the myths of Europe as a space of freedom of speech and movement, economic development and the rule of law. For many participants of the Maidan protests, “Europe” became a symbolic antithesis both to the Yanukovich regime and the “Soviet past”. As for the former, Yanukovich completely lost his legitimacy as he demonstrated his impotence in guaranteeing the protesters’ rights and avoiding violence. At the same time, in the minds of many people, all things Soviet, especially within the context of the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas, became associated with Putin’s Russia and its aggressive policies<sup>19</sup>.

## The “Great Patriotic War” and the Ukrainian crisis of 2013–2015

On February 21, 2014, the popular Russian newspaper “Komsomolskaya Pravda” ran an unsettling headline on the front page: “After seizing Ukraine, banderites will take aim at Russia”. Six days later, plans for a referendum were announced, and on March 16, the referendum “for the reunification of Crimea and Russia” was held. In addition to the “right to self-determination” and “Crimea has always been a part of Russia”, the arguments used to politically prop up this “reunification” included the need to protect the peninsula against a “punishing operation” which, it was claimed, was already planned by “the banderites’ loyal followers” in the Kyiv government.

The Kremlin propaganda covering the events in Ukraine was already using the language of the “Great Patriotic War” and portraying the Maidan not only as an “American conspiracy”, but also as a reincarnation of the very same fascism the victory over which had been officially celebrated on May 9 since 1965. In the official Russian media, the Ukrainian volunteer units were obsessively represented as “punishers” committing atrocities against civilians. Within this logic of agitprop, present-day Russia was identified with the Red Army, which won over the Nazis, and the politics of interference with the Ukrainian crisis was explained by the need to protect the world against the new/old “fascism” from the Maidan.

The historical-emotional bridge from 1941–1945 to 2014–2015 played a key role in the justification for the war on the part of self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics. The ideological constructs of these entities existing under Russia’s military and economic wardship combine the elements of late Soviet mythology, anti-oligarchic sentiment, Christian Orthodox discourse and Hollywood mass culture. In many public pronouncements by the LNR and DNR leaders, their declared “anti-fascism” goes hand in hand with anti-Semitic statements (Mitrokhin, 2015).

One could have expected Ukraine to respond to this tide of propaganda with an upsurge of radical nationalist sentiment. Such a development would have appeared all the more logical considering the fact that the Maidan protesters legitimised the nationalist slogan “Glory to Ukraine! Glory to the heroes!” and often waved the OUN’s black and red flag. Yet even the rhetoric that leaders of the right-wing volunteer unit Azov and the right-wing party Right Sector use to describe the current war is dominated by symbolic allusions not to the UPA’s tradition but to the Soviet narrative! In particular, in September 2014, the Right Sector’s leader wrote about “our Great Patriotic War” (Yarosh, 2015), while the Azov battalion called



Donetsk airport, which the Ukrainian forces had been controlling for 242 days, “our Pavlov’s House” (Kuznetsova, Sabinova, Sokolovskaia, 2015).<sup>20</sup>

Using the symbols of the “Great Patriotic War” when describing the heroic deeds of the Ukrainian fighters became commonplace in the official rhetoric coming from Kyiv. Yet on August 24, 2014, in his speech on the occasion of Ukraine’s Independence Day, President Petro Poroshenko (2014) said that Ukraine was waging a “Patriotic War” in Donbas. Many Ukrainian politicians compared the struggle for Donetsk airport to the defence of the Brest Fortress, and on February 14 2015, an advisor to the Home Affairs Minister, Zorian Shkiriak (2015), said that the enemy was “deliberately turning Debaltsevo into Stalingrad”, meaning the intensity of fire and the scale of destruction of this key railway junction. The most eloquent pronouncement was a comment made by the Kyiv-appointed Luhansk Region’s governor Hennadii Moskal (2014) regarding an assault by LNR combatants on a Ukrainian checkpoint near Bakhmutka in October 2014: “these are General Vlasov’s true heirs, who villainously breach all agreements”<sup>21</sup>.

The frequency of usage of these similes can be explained first of all by the strong inertia of late Soviet education and mass culture, and by family memories of the war. References to the Brest Fortress, Pavlov’s House or even “treacherous soldiers from Vlasov’s army” prove to be more recognisable than fragments of the history of the UPA or other Ukrainian anti-Soviet underground movements.

This brings us to the difficult question of whether post-Maidan Ukraine will seriously compete with today’s Russia for the “Great Victory”, whether it will dispute the statement that Russia would have won the war “even without Ukraine”, which Putin still made in 2010 (Kolbasian, 2011), or his other statement, made in 2015, to the effect that “it was most of all Russian people who sacrificed their lives for the sake of victory” (Putin, 2015).

In the context of an open conflict (often called a hybrid war) with Russia, the Ukrainian government and President Petro Poroshenko are looking for ways to symbolically distance themselves from the Soviet past and the modern Russian historical narrative. In particular, Defender of the Fatherland Day was transferred from February 23 to October 14 – the date which the UPA chose as the official date of its establishment. On April 9, 2015, the Verkhovna Rada (Ukraine’s parliament) passed laws recognising members of different Ukrainian political organizations acting throughout the 20th century (including the nationalist underground during World War II) as “fighters for Ukraine’s independence”, and establishing May 8 as the Day of Memory and Reconciliation. Yet May 9 retains its status of an official holiday – Victory Day. The privileges granted to the Red Army’s

## The “Great Patriotic War” in the politics of memory in Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine

veterans are also not questioned, and the Hero of Ukraine medal, shaped as a five-pointed star (as it was designed during the presidency of Leonid Kuchma, who introduced it), remains the highest honour awarded, among others, to Ukrainian soldiers fighting in Donbas.

Thus, the politics of memory pursued by the official channels in Kyiv retains a certain ambivalence and still contains many elements of Soviet symbols which chimerically intertwine with elements of the nationalist narrative.

## Different (and similar) images of the war

In all three countries sketched out here, the subject of the Second World War remains a central one for the politics of memory and oblivion. Unlike Belarus or Moldova, there is regional diversity in Ukraine when it comes to models of memory, as well as continuity (since 1991) in the historical narratives laid out in its textbooks. The most radical textbook changes have been made in Belarus. In Moldova, the struggle over the history curriculum in high schools (or, rather, the very name of the discipline) has demonstrated the greatest potential for social mobilisation. And the main common denominator in the evolution of the three countries is the fact that the Soviet myth of the “Great Patriotic War”, once whole, has been nationalised (albeit by emphatically Communist or “anti-nationalist” authorities) and adapted to local expectations and needs. It is these variations and modifications that contain highly interesting information about society and government in the three neighbouring countries. The trajectory of development of all three countries can be described in most general terms (of course keeping in mind the significant differences) as a movement from the more straightforward national formulae through a re-Sovietisation of varying intensity to a search for models of a political nation and civic identity.

English language version provided by the author.

This text was previously published as *Der “Große Vaterländische Krieg” in den Erinnerungskulturen von Belarus, Moldova und der Ukraine. Versuch eines Vergleichs*. In S. Troebst und J. Wolf (Eds.) (2011), *Erinnern an den Zweiten Weltkrieg. Mahnmale und Museen in Mittel- und Osteuropa* (pp. 227–241). Earlier, shorter versions of this text were published in the Polish and Ukrainian languages in *Res Publica Nowa*, 7, 24–34 (2009); *Ukraina Moderna*, 4(15), 206–218 (2009).

Andrii Portnov is currently a visiting researcher at the Department of Slavic Studies at Humboldt University in Berlin.

## References

- Balmaceda, M. M., Clem, J. I., & Tarlow, L. I. (Eds.). (2002). *Independent Belarus. Domestic Determinants, Regional Dynamics, and the Implications for the West*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Brandon, R., & Lower, W. (Eds.). (2008). *The Shoah in Ukraine: History, Testimony, Memorialization*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Cojocari, L. (2007). Political Liturgies and Concurrent Memories in the Context of Nation-Building Process in Post-Soviet Moldova: The Case of "Victory Day". *Interstitio. East European Review of Historical Anthropology*, 1(2), 87-116.
- Feichtinger, W., & Malek, M. (Eds.). (2008). *Belarus zwischen Russland und der EU. Sowjetische Vergangenheit, autoritäre Gegenwart – demokratische Zukunft?* Vienna: Landesverteidigungsakademie.
- Gerasimov, I. (2014). Ukraine 2014: The First Postcolonial Revolution. Introduction to the Forum. *Ab Imperio*, 3, 22-44.
- Goujon, A. (2010). Memorial Narratives of WWII Partisans and Genocide in Belarus. *East European Politics and Societies*, 24(1), 6-25.
- Ihrig, S. (2008). *Wer sind die Moldawier? Rumänismus versus Moldowanismus in Historiographie und Schulbüchern der Republik Moldova, 1991-2006*. Stuttgart: ibidem.
- Jilge, W. (2006). The Politics of History and the Second World War in Post-Communist Ukraine (1986/1991 – 2004/2005). *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, 1, 50-81.
- Kovalenia, A., & Stshkevich, N. (2004). *Velikaia Otechestvennaia voïna sovetского naroda (v kontekste Vtoroi mirovoi voïny): Uchebnoe posobie dlia 11 klassa*. Minsk.
- Khromeychuk, O. (2013). "Undetermined" Ukrainians. *Post-War Narratives of the Waffen SS 'Galicia' Division*. Bern: Peter Lang Verlag.
- Kolbasian. (2011, January 22). *Putin: Rossiia pobedila by v VOV bez Ukrainy* [Video file]. Retrieved November 1, 2015, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xiS0Ihz9RmY>
- Kusko, A., & Taki, V. (2003). "Kto my?" Istoriograficheskii vybor: rumynskaia natsia ili moldavskaia gosudarstvennost. *Ab Imperio*, 1, 485-495.
- Kuznetsova, O., Sabinova A., Sokolovskaia Ya. (2015), Vynuzhdeny byli sdāt to, chto eshio god nazad bylo prekrasnym, sovremennym aeroportom, Retrieved November 1, 2015, from <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2651185>
- Marples, D. R. (1999). *Belarus: A Denationalized Nation*. London: Routledge.
- Marples, D. R., & Millis, F. V. (Eds.). (2015). *Ukraine's Euromaidan: Analyses of a Civil Revolution*. Stuttgart: ibidem.
- Mitrokhin, N. (2015). Antifashysty protiv evreev. Retrieved November 1, 2015, from <http://grani.ru/opinion/mitrokhin/m.237531.html>
- Moskal' G. (2014). Terroristy napali na blokpost ukrainskoï armii pod Bakhmutkoï – idiot boï, sviaz' poteriana. Retrieved November 1, 2015, from [http://censor.net.ua/news/306966/terroristy\\_napali\\_na\\_blokpost\\_ukrainskoyi\\_armii\\_pod\\_bahmutkoyi\\_idet\\_boyi\\_svyaz\\_poteryana\\_moskal](http://censor.net.ua/news/306966/terroristy_napali_na_blokpost_ukrainskoyi_armii_pod_bahmutkoyi_idet_boyi_svyaz_poteryana_moskal)
- Motyka, G. (2011). *Od rzezi wołyńskiej do akcji "Wisła". Konflikt polsko-ukraiński 1943-1947*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie.
- Osteuropa. (2010). Der Fall Belarus. Gewalt, Macht, Ohnmacht. *Osteuropa*, 12.
- Oushakine, S. (2011). V poiskakh mesta mezhdru Stalinym i Hitlerom: o postkolonialnykh istoriikh sotsializma. *Ab Imperio*, 1, 209-233.
- Poroshenko P. (2014). Tsia viïna uviïde v istoriiu iak vitchyzniana, Retrieved November 1, 2015, from <http://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2014/08/24/7035656/>
- Portnov, A. (2008). Pluralität der Erinnerung Denkmäler und Geschichtspolitik in der Ukraine. *Osteuropa*, 6, 197-210.
- Portnov, A. (2010). *Uprazhneniia s istorieï po-ukrainski*. Moscow, OGI.
- Portnov, A., & Portnova, T. (2010). Der Preis des Sieges. Der Krieg und die Konkurrenz der Veteranen in der Ukraine. *Osteuropa*, 5, 27-41.
- Putin, V. (2015). Mezhdunarodnyi den' pamiati zhertv Kholokosta. Retrieved November 1, 2015, from <http://www.kremlin.ru/news/47529>
- Raabe, K., & Sapper, M. (Eds.). (2015). *Testfall Ukraine. Europa und seine Werte*. Berlin: Suhrkamp.
- Rodgers, P. (2008). *Nation, Region and History in Post-Communist Transitions: Identity Politics in Ukraine, 1991-2006*. Stuttgart: ibidem.
- Rudling, P. A. (2011). The OUN, the UPA, and the Holocaust: A Study in the Manufacturing of Historical Myths. *The Carl Beck Papers in Russian and East European Studies*, 2107.
- Rudling, P. A. (2012). The Khatyn Massacre in Belorussia: A Historical Controversy Revisited. *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 26(1), 29-58.
- Shatalava, V. (2008). Tseni vaïny: palitseiïiia i partyzany ũ pamiatsi nasel'nitstva belaruskai vïoski. *Homo historicus*, 1, 384-389.
- Shikiriak, Z. (2015), Rossiïsko-terroristicheskaia armia prevrashaet Debalstevo v Stalingrad. Retrieved November 1, 2015, from <http://inforesist.org/shkiryak-rossijsko-terroristicheskaya-armiya-prevrashaet-debalcevo-v-stalingrad/>
- Smalianchuk, A. (2007). Druhaia susvetnaia vaïna ũ pamiatsi nasel'nitstva zakhodniaha i ũskhodniaha pamezhzha Belarusi. In E. Smul'kova & A. Engelking (Eds.), *Pogranicza Bialorusi w perspektywie interdyscyplinarnej*, (pp. 121-156). Warszawa: Wydawnictwo DiG.
- Smalianchuk, A. (2008). Shkol'ny padruchnik pa historyi Belarusi yak "mestsa pamiatsi/mestsa zabytstsia" pra Druhuiu susvetnuiu vaïnu. *Homo historicus*, 1, 370-383.

- Snyder, T. (2003). The Causes of Ukrainian-Polish Ethnic Cleansing 1943. *Past and Present*, 179, 197-234.
- Solonari, V. (2002). Narrative, Identity, State: History Teaching in Moldova. *East European Politics and Societies*, 16(2), 415-446.
- Stepanenko, V., & Bylinskyi, Y. (Eds.). (2014). *Ukraine after Euromaidan: Challenges and Hopes*. Bern: Peter Lang Verlag.
- Tykhomirov, A. (2004). Ukraïna ta Ukraïnci na storinkakh bilorus'kykh pidruchnykiv z istorii dlia serednikh shkyl. *Zbirnyk Kharkivs'koho istoriko-filolohichnoho tovarystva*, 10, 348-357.
- Wanner, C. (1998). *Burden of Dreams: History and Identity in Post-Soviet Ukraine*. University Park: Penn State Press.
- Wilson, A. (2011). *Belarus. The Last Dictatorship in Europe*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Yanukovych, V. (2011). Zvernennia Prezydenta Ukrainy z nahody 70. Richnyt-si trahedii v Babynomu Yaru. Retrieved November 15, 2014, from <http://www.president.gov.ua/news/21351.html>
- Yarosh, D. (2015). My oshiblis', podderzhav Poroshenko. Retrieved November 1, 2015, from <http://inforesist.org/my-oshiblis-podderzhav-poroshenko-yarosh/>
- Yurchuk, Y. (2014). *Reordering of Meaningful Worlds: Memory of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army in Post-Soviet Ukraine*. Stockholm: Stockholm University.
- Yushchenko, V. (2006). Zvernennia Prezydenta Ukrainy na Den' Peremohy. Retrieved May 1, 2015, from <http://www.president.gov.ua/news/3179.html>
- Zhurzenko, T. (2014). From borderlands to bloodlands. Retrieved September 19, 2014, from <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2014-09-19-zhurzhenko-en.html>

## Notes

- 1 For more information on the "Partisan Belarus" symbols see Goujon (2010).
- 2 For more information on the memories of war in post-Soviet Belarusian society, see Smalianchuk (2007); Shatalava (2008) and others.
- 3 More details can be found in Smalianchuk (2008).
- 4 In relation to the nature of President Lukashenko's regime, Belarus was often metaphorically described as "the last dictatorship in Europe" (Wilson, 2011). See also Marples (1999); Balmaceda, Clem, & Tarlow (2002); Feichtinger & Malek (2008); Osteuropa (2010).
- 5 See: Kovalenia & Stshkevich (2004). This textbook describes the 're-unification' of 1939 according to the late Soviet scheme, but mentions "mistakes and extremes"

## The "Great Patriotic War" in the politics of memory in Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine

- which are limited to the closing of the churches. The book also mentions the Holocaust and devotes a separate chapter to the Belarusian collaborators with the Nazis.
- 6 All quotes from Lukashenko speeches are taken from the official webpage of the President of the Republic of Belarus: <http://president.gov.by>
  - 7 The memorial complex on the site of Khatyn village, which was burned down in March 1943, was opened near Minsk in 1969. For more information on its symbolisation, see Oushakine (2011); Rudling (2012).
  - 8 I owe this observation to conversations with my Belarusian colleague, Andrei Tykhomirov.
  - 9 For more details, see Ihrig (2008).
  - 10 The same strategies of "domestication" of the memorials to Soviet soldiers could be found in Ukraine. See for example the story of such a memorial in the East Galician town of Slavs'ke in Portnov (2008).
  - 11 The point regarding the continuity of the Moldovan statehood is to a large degree a product of Soviet historiography. During the brief existence of the Moldavian Democratic Republic (January 24 – March 27, 1918), there were no attempts to trace the history of statehood to the medieval Moldavian principality (Kusko & Taki, 2003, p. 490).
  - 12 For more details on the politics of memory in post-Soviet Ukraine, see Wanner (1998); Rodgers. (2008); Portnov (2010) and others.
  - 13 On the history of the Volhynian ethnic cleansing see Motyka (2011); Snyder (2003).
  - 14 For more information, see Rudling (2011). Among the numerous publications on the Holocaust in Ukraine see Brandon & Lower (2008).
  - 15 For more information on the various groups of veterans and their role in Ukrainian politics, see Portnov & Portnova (2010).
  - 16 Kul'chytskyi, S. (Ed.) (2005). OUN i UPA. Fakhovyi vysnovok robochoi hrupy istorykiv pry uriadovi komisii z vyvchennia diial'nosti OUN i UPA. The analysis of this document could be found in Jilge (2006).
  - 17 A special research of the memories of the UPA: Yurchuk (2014). On the question of collaboration with the Nazis and its relevance for the memory politics in post-Soviet Ukraine see Khromeychuk (2013).
  - 18 President of Ukraine Speech on Victory Day. May 9, 2006.
  - 19 Among the publications on the Maidan and the 'Ukraine Crisis' see Stepanenko & Bylinskyi (2014); Marples & Millis (2015); Raabe & Sapper (2015); and others. Important interpretative insights can be found in Gerasimov. (2014); Zhurzenko (2014).
  - 20 'Pavlov's House' – an apartment house in Stalingrad defended during the Battle of Stalingrad in 1943 by the group of Soviet soldiers commanded by sergeant Yakov Pavlov. 'Pavlov's House' became one of the most recognisable Soviet symbols of the 'Great Patriotic War'.
  - 21 Moskal' spoke of the Soviet general Andrei Vlasov who in 1942 was taken prisoner together with his soldiers by German troops. In 1943, Vlasov became the commander of the anti-Soviet Russian Liberation Army (ROA). In 1945, Vlasov was captured by the Soviets and executed in 1946 as 'the betrayer of the Motherland'.