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Per A. Rudling

# TARNISHED HEROES

The Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists in the  
Memory Politics of Post-Soviet Ukraine

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In the memory of Jeffrey Burds (1958-2024)

For the Ukrainian defenders of freedom, democracy and  
the right to self-determination

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## A Note on Transliteration and Place Names

Throughout this book Ukrainian terms and name forms for Ukrainian places and persons are used. In accordance with the publishers guidelines, the transliterations follow the modified Library of Congress system of transliteration from the Cyrillic. Russian and Ukrainian я is transliterated as "ia," (except initial Я: "Ya," eg. Yaroslav) Russian e as "e," (except initial Е, "Ye," eg. Yeltsin), Ukrainian є as "ie" (except initial Є, "Ye," eg. Yendyk) Russian and Ukrainian ю as "iu," (except initial Ю, given as "Yu" eg. Yukhnovs'kyi). Ukrainian ї is transliterated as "i". Russian and Ukrainian soft sign, ь, as ', Russian hard sign, ъ, Ukrainian apostrophe ' as ", eg. V"iatrovych. Ukrainian names already transliterated in non-Ukrainian printed sources appear as they do in the sources, eg Serhy, Ostriitchouk, Kubijovyč.

Ukrainian name forms and terms are used, i.e. Kyiv, L'viv, Odesa. As many place names have undergone multiple changes over the past century contemporary names are provided next to historical ones. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.



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## Introduction

Following the 2014 popular uprising against the corrupt government of Viktor Yanukovych (b. 1950, president 2010-2014) and the subsequent Russian invasion, journalist Anne Applebaum (b. 1964) argued “Nationalism is exactly what Ukraine needs.” The argument for nationalism, she admitted, is not easily made: “you can’t really make ‘the case’ for nationalism; you can only inculcate it, teach it to your children, cultivate it at public events. If you do so, nationalism can in turn inspire you so that you try to improve your country, to help it live up to the image you want it to have....Ukrainians need more of this kind of inspiration, not less ... They need more occasions when they can shout, ‘Slava Ukraini—Heroyam Slava’—‘Glory to Ukraine, Glory to its Heroes,’ which was, yes, the slogan of the controversial Ukrainian Revolutionary Army [sic!] in the 1940s, but has been adopted to a new context.”<sup>1</sup> Whereas Applebaum acknowledged its problematic history, she welcomed the appropriation of the symbolism of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) by a young, aspiring democracy. In this approach, Appelbaum is not alone; between 2005 and 2010, and 2014-2019 the promotion of the legacy of the OUN and UPA was official Ukrainian policy. President Viktor Yushchenko (b. 1954, president 2005-2010) posthumously designated its leaders official heroes of Ukraine; under Petro Poroshenko (b. 1965, president 2014-2019) they were formally rehabilitated. In 2015 “disrespect” for them was outlawed.

Across the region, there is an increasing gulf widening between new research findings in the academic discipline of history and claims advanced by governmental agencies of “national memory” —as a rule nurturing narratives of self-victimization and identity construction by maintaining and reproducing traumas of the past. This book seeks to address this gulf. The status as a vic-

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1 Anne Applebaum, “Nationalism Is Exactly What Ukraine Needs,” *AnneApplebaum*, May 12, 2014, <https://www.anneapplebaum.com/2014/05/12/nationalism-is-exactly-what-ukraine-needs/> (Accessed May 18, 2014).

tim nation is politically attracted in that it serves the aim of obtaining a “moral alibi” by dislodging agency and responsibility in past atrocities, communist as well as nationalist. Moreover, this narration is often invoked to justify wrongdoings by the ingroup as defensive actions.<sup>2</sup> At the heart of this inquiry lies a set of deeper questions: is it possible to decouple history and memory? What are the stakes and liabilities of doing so?

The study starts with a background on the origins of Ukrainian nationalism and its development in the Habsburg and Russian Empires. Chapter one chronicles the emergence of modern Ukrainian nationalism from its emergence, in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century until the end of World War I, the division of Ukrainian-speaking lands and the establishment of the Soviet Union in 1922-23. Chapter two provides the context and background to how the frustration born out of the failure to establish a Ukrainian nation-state in 1918-1919 came to shape Ukrainian nationalism during the following decades. The crisis of democracy, rise of authoritarianism, fascism and Stalinism fueled a process of radicalization. In Soviet Ukraine, policies aimed at “rooting” Soviet rule by stimulating Ukrainian national consciousness and cultural autonomy were replaced, from 1928, by hyper-centralization, purges, and terror. Collectivization of agriculture was carried out at an utterly brutal pace, resulting in a massive famine devastating much of rural Ukraine. Purges, at the end of the 1930s paralyzed society and stifled political initiative. In Western Ukraine, part of the increasingly authoritarian Second Polish republic, a violent Ukrainian extreme right movement gained notoriety over the 1930s. The Soviet occupation of Western Ukraine destroyed the fabric of Western Ukrainian society; the German occupation in 1941 triggered new waves of mass violence, and marked the beginning of the Holocaust. During the period of extreme political violence, also constituted the peak of Ukrainian Nationalist violence; OUN

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2 Florence Fröhlich, “Victimhood and Building Identities on Past Suffering,” in Ninna Mörner, ed. *Constructions and Instrumentalization of the Past: A Comparative Study on Memory Management in the Region* (=CBEEES State of the Region Report, 2020) (Huddinge: Center for Baltic and East European Studies, 2020), 23-36, here: 25.

terror against political rivals and ethnic minorities culminated in 1941-44. Uniting most of the Ukrainian ethnographic territories, post-war Ukrainian SSR (RSR in Ukrainian), “the Second Soviet Republic,” came to play a key role in the Soviet Union.

The third chapter is a study of the crystallization of post-Soviet narrations of the past, and, the emergence of government agencies aimed at shaping “national memory.” Specific attention is placed on the institutional framework behind the *Geschichtspolitik* conducted since this became a governmental priority from 2005.

The narration promoted by the newly established governmental agencies of memory management were not new. Chapters four, five, and six, problematize, respectively, the edifyingly patriotic narration the OUN, in emigration and, from 1990, in Ukraine. Structured around three of its wartime leaders—Mykola Lebed’ (1909 or 1910-1998), Roman Shukhevych (1907-1950) and Stepan Bandera (1909-1959) they inquire strategies of patriotic disavowal, deflection, and denial. If Bandera led the radical faction that split the OUN in 1940-41, Lebed’ served as its acting leader from August 1941 to May, 1943, when he was replaced by Shukhevych, who led the organization until the fall of 1944, the climax of which its campaign of ethnic violence.

Long venerated in the Ukrainian diaspora, these men were rehabilitated after 2005, with the latter two assigned central roles in modern Ukrainian history. As the ideological orientation of these men diverged sharply from liberal democratic norms, significant efforts were invested in re-casting the new national heroes as appropriate symbols for the young state. Problematic aspects of OUN ideology were misrepresented, involvement in mass atrocities denied, covered up, or legitimized. The airbrushing, practiced in emigration during the Cold War became government policy under Yushchenko. The main lines of argumentation of the denialist discourse were well established by the 1980s; new inquiry into Ukrainian Nationalist collaboration in the Holocaust was met with a well-rehearsed, coordinated apologia. As we will see, the emotional arguments that followed Yushchenko’s designation of Shukhevych and Bandera as Heroes of Ukraine in 2007 and 2010

mirrored those in the Ukrainian diaspora press following the exposure of Lebed' by a New York paper a quarter-century earlier.

While there now is a significant body of literature on the role of the OUN in anti-Jewish and anti-Polish violence, other aspects of OUN ideology remain understudied. Chapter seven is a study of racial and eugenic thought in the Ukrainian ultra-nationalist tradition. These currents in OUN thought are closely associated with yet another war-time leader, rehabilitated by Yushchenko; Bandera's deputy, the self-proclaimed 1941 OUN "Prime Minister" Yaroslav Stets'ko (1912-1986).

The post-1945 historiography of the OUN offers specific difficulties; unlike the situation in former Axis powers, where the institutional framework and continuity was broken, the Ukrainian far right continued its activities in emigration, first from Germany, then from Canada and the US. In exile, the OUN(b) leaders were in a position not only to shape the narration of the war, integrated into various institutional framework, many of which covertly or overtly funded by their new host countries. For nearly half a century, Lebed' was actively involved in promoting a sanitized, heroic legacy of himself and the organizations he led. Funded covertly by the U.S. government for over four decades, Lebed' and the revisionist splinter group of the OUN that he managed, engaged in a systematic white-washing the inconvenient aspects of his own, and the OUN's past. During the Cold War the émigré Nationalists found new roles for themselves as "the West's most faithful allies." Sponsorship came from several state actors; Lebed's group mostly from the U.S., Bandera and Stets'ko from Franco's Spain and Chang Kai-Shek's Taiwan. From 1971, all three wings of the OUN benefited from Canadian multicultural funding. For a number of reasons, including strategic interest and reasons of geopolitics, the historiography was significantly distorted; to the systematic distortions by émigré Nationalists during the Cold War yet another layer of distortion was added following the repatriation to Ukraine of these narratives after 1991.

What is the proper nomenclature and taxonomy to be used to categorize OUN(b) ideology? During the Cold War, diaspora scholarship developed a rigid taxonomy which precluded the

existence of Ukrainian fascism, denied the very existence of anti-Semitic organizations, ruling out, a priori, phenomena, observed in the rest of Europe, such as collaboration. Diaspora activists developed a coded language which served as an ideological underpinning to their discourse of disavowal and denial, further complicating a candid engagement with local agency in wartime ethnic violence. A candid engagement with this “undigested” past was not facilitated by the establishment of an government agencies of memory management. In 2006, a Ukrainian Institute of National Memory was established, staffed with activists from the OUN(b)’s own front organizations. In 2015, another complicating factor was added, a set of memory laws were enacted, explicitly designated in order to “protect” the edifyingly patriotic narration and outlaw “disrespect” for the OUN(b) and UPA. Chapter eight seeks to contextualize the genealogy of the discourse of the OUN’s “non-fascism” and “non-collaboration,” hegemonic in the Ukrainian diaspora, re-patriated to Ukraine proper after 1990.

Memory cultures of disavowal and memory laws have hampered understanding and complicated processes of reconciliation between Ukraine, Poland, and Israel. If there is any beneficiary from this, it is the Russian Federation. Its use of systematic dissemination of disinformation further complicates addressing the dark past. Ill-advised memory policies under Volodymyr Zelensky’s (b. 1978, president 2019-) predecessors are weaponized as the basis for a relentless barrage of disinformation in an attempt to discredit the Ukrainian state project as “Nazi,” “genocidal,” and “satanist.” The Russian Federation’s shrill misrepresentations goes beyond merely falsification of history. Its systematic distortion forms the ideological underpinning for the Russian Federation’s policy of revenge and neo-imperial expansion. This issue has become something more than merely an academic discussion of how to engage a troubled historical past; these issues are directly connected to contemporary politics, and has come to form the basis for large scale warfare in Europe. Following the full-scale Russian military assault on Ukraine, the long overdue critical engagement with a difficult past, suppressed by multiple actors—Soviet censors, émigré Nationalists, memory laws and governmental

memory managers—already difficult in an era of fake news and information warfare has been rendered all but impossible. Even raising these issues has become a liability, which inevitably lead to accusations of “promoting the Kremlin’s narrative,” “neo-Soviet historiography,” or “Ukrainophobia,” and denunciations to deans, head of departments, and vice chancellors.

Is it even possible to discuss these matters in times of war? Should the difficult chapters of the past even be problematized? Answering these questions in the affirmative, this study concludes with a post-script, written during the 2022 full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. It argues that the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, its militias and paramilitaries need to be problematized, deconstructed, and scrutinized. As symbols for a liberal, democratic and pluralistic society they are tarnished heroes. As Ukraine starts membership negotiations with the European Union, the author hopes that this book would help facilitate critical and candid discussions on the past.