

Oleksandr Melnyk

World War II as an Identity Project

Historicism, Legitimacy Contests, and the (Re-)Construction of
Political Communities in Ukraine, 1939–1946

With a foreword by David R. Marples

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Oleksandr Melnyk

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Letter to Petro Vershyhora

Write. Write as much as possible. Do not trust memory. Facts are remembered to a lesser or greater extent, but feelings and all things dear and delicate that grow out of experiences vanish from memory [...] Write a lot about everything. Record your thoughts, the thoughts of Kovpak and other people. Remember: Kovpak must remain part of the arts and history of Ukraine, and it is your responsibility to make sure of it [...] Let partisans write. Teach them. Encourage them. Let them keep diaries, intimate and warm, not officious reports for household use. Maybe your diary will grow into a book about the Ukrainian people fighting for life. The book has to show heroic characters, military skills, human passions, elation, battle exploits, a spiritual greatness equal to that of our glorious forefathers, as well as the lowness, incompetence, darkness, treason, and wanderings through the labyrinths of the giant cataclysm, through swamps and fires, amidst ruins and gallows, like wild beasts in the forests, sometimes without an oath, without knowledge of history, without well-nourished feelings of patriotism and prey to various influences aggravated by an agitation that makes use of all our stupid mistakes [...] Write. Time is running out. Appoint a record keeper for yourself and the old man [Kovpak]. Restore all human passions, movements, tears, pride and hatred for the enemy, revenge, and passion. Do not allow them to lapse into oblivion. [...] Do not follow the example of our glorious forefathers, Zaporozhian Cossacks, who, after their scepters and alcohol flasks disintegrated under the pressure of time, left behind hardly any historical traces, so that even their history must be written using the testimonies of foreign contemporaries [...]. Instead, follow the example of the Germans. It is true that they, bastards, have no ideals, because the ideas they are fighting for are heinous, but we, people of higher ideals, creators and authors of history, should not fail to record for posterity the beatings of our hearts and the fire of our reason.

Oleksandr Dovzhenko, June 1943

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Note on Transliteration

I have transliterated from Ukrainian place names associated with the Ukrainian SSR. Except for notable Ukrainian political, military, and cultural figures (Sydir Kovpak, Oleksandr Dovzhenko, Petro Vershyhora and others), I have used transliterations from Russian to render in English first and last names of individuals associated with the Soviet state. If they hailed from the territory of the Ukrainian SSR or were ethnic Ukrainians, I provided Ukrainian transliterations in brackets at the first use.

Foreword

The Second World War was arguably the most important event of the 20th century. It began in China, exploded in Europe, then ignited in the Pacific, and eventually involved most of the world's key armies. But the victims of the war were principally in Europe and Asia. The war redefined the world. The winners emerged as the arbiters of the new world order, founders of the United Nations, and the decision-makers responsible for new European borders and the future of Germany.

But it was also defined by its losses. In that regard, much focus has been on Hitler's attempt to eliminate the Jews of Europe in the Holocaust. For the Soviet Union, on the other hand, the war was the great legitimizer, and ensured the longer-term survival of the world's first Communist state. Stalin was at the table in Yalta and Potsdam with his American and British counterparts and, at Yalta and Potsdam, his position was powerful enough to dictate the future of Europe.

In the USSR, the postwar years were to see the war memorialized, starting in the early 1960s, and developing more fully after the 20th anniversary of victory in 1965. In those days, different narratives were deployed: a triumphalism regarding the Red Army's victory, praise for the heroism of the partisans and, less conspicuously but constantly, the treachery of the "Ukrainian bourgeois nationalists" and Baltic nationalists who were the "hirelings" of the German occupiers in the period extending from 1944 to the early postwar years.

Later, in the period of post-Soviet independence, the Great Patriotic War, at least initially, was no longer the focus of official rhetoric. Russia took over the Soviet mantle, inheriting the USSR's embassies and domestic buildings, including the Kremlin in Moscow. But the notion of the great friendship of the Soviet peoples was undermined by the desire of the former republics to break free from Moscow and to establish their own futures. The largest and most contentious case was always Ukraine. Though Ukraine's contribution to the war was immense – at least 6 million troops served

in the Red Army, and proportionally it suffered the most losses of any state fighting in Europe other than Belarus—the legacy of the war was a mixed one and largely undefined.

As this book shows, starting in the early 21st century, Russia began to treat the war once again as the defining moment of its modern identity. Vladimir Putin “privatized” the war, and began to belittle, undermine, or simply ignore the contribution from Western countries, especially the United States. The Russian version has stressed the unity of the Soviet people, and the accomplishment of that same people in defeating the Nazi hordes, driving them out of Soviet territory and pursuing them all the way to Berlin, thus bringing democracy to Europe. Within this narrative is implicit condemnation of Western countries’ ingratitude for their liberation, and a lack of respect for the sacrifices of the Red Army.

In the current narrative, there is little place for the Holocaust, or for the Pacific War or the war in Africa, and there is not much room to consider collaboration and the forces fighting on the enemy side against the Soviet Union. For Ukraine, however, the issues involved were very complex, and begin with the lack of a national state and the failure of the Great Powers after the First World War to address Ukrainian aspirations for independence.

On the one hand, there was not one Ukraine, but four: Soviet Ukraine, with its capital in Kharkiv until 1934, when it was changed to Kyiv; and Western Ukraine, whose lands were part of newly established old and new states: Poland, Romania, and Czechoslovakia. On the other, none of the Ukrainian territories had any independent decision-making power.

Soviet Ukraine experienced several different historical phases after the brutal period of the Civil War, German occupation, and various White and anarchist bands forming short-lived governments, ending in widespread famine in 1921. In the 1920s, a program of indigenization was in place that permitted some room for the development of the Ukrainian language and culture, as long as the ideology remained closely attuned to Soviet Communism. But it was never a straightforward matter for Communism to attract the allegiance of Ukrainians. No ethnic Ukrainians were entrusted with

republican party leadership during the time of Lenin and Stalin, for example.

The 1930s might be described as the “age of cataclysms”, beginning with the man-made famine of the Holodomor, starting in 1932 and peaking in 1933, which saw the deaths of some 3.9 million people, and even more if one includes the mostly Ukrainian North Caucasus to the southeast. It was soon followed by Stalin's Purges and mass arrests, executions, and deportations, coinciding with the evisceration of Ukrainian professional, political, and cultural leaders, and not least the mass of “kulaks” who could never be trusted and made up the majority of the victims. In the late 1980s, as archives began to be opened in the more tolerant era of Mikhail Gorbachev's Glasnost, followed by the “archival revolution” that Dr. Melnyk describes, more details became available about the extent of Stalin's terror and the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) executions at sites like Bykivnia, near Kyiv.

As Hitler's Germany began to reverse the stipulations of the postwar Versailles Treaty, marching into the Rhineland, annexing Austria, colluding with the Western Powers to grab the Sudetenland from Czechoslovakia, Stalin and his new Foreign Minister Viacheslav Molotov began discussions with their German counterparts, and the Nazi-Soviet Pact was signed in August 1939, with its secret protocols dividing Poland, the Baltic states, and parts of Romania between them. For Ukrainians, the material benefit was the reunification of Soviet Ukraine with the Ukrainian lands of Poland and later Romania. For Stalin, the new territories added to the authority of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) and “[ethnized] the political discourse” (p. 22, below).

On the other side of the border, Ukrainian national life developed under duress in Galicia under Polish rule. The Polish state, while less repressive than its Soviet counterpart, tolerated Ukrainian political and cultural life only insofar as it conformed to the authoritarian state and its institutions. In the 1920s, some Ukrainian activists turned to the Communist Party of Western Ukraine, a branch of the Communist Party of Poland, which became dangerous once the mother party in Moscow began to speak of deviations,

Trotskyites or Zinovievites. The party in any case was dissolved in 1938 by the Comintern.

The 1930s, however, saw the dramatic rise in rightist ideologies, from the already well-established Italian Fascism to German National Socialism. The Ukrainian Military Organization (UVO) had evolved into the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) by 1929, an illegal terrorist organization that targeted public officials, buildings, and attracted a following in the Ukrainian villages, often from the sons of priests of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church. Its leader was a military man, Ievhen Konovalets', who was assassinated by an NKVD agent in Rotterdam in 1938.

In 1940, the OUN divided into two wings—a smaller one around the natural successor of Konovalets', Andrii Melnyk, and a larger, more dynamic group around Stepan Bandera, a priest's son from Staryi Uhryniv in the Stanislav region (today Ivano-Frankivs'k), whose name would continue to provoke extreme emotions in his own lifetime and in the decades after his death, by assassination, in 1959. Both groups perceived Hitler's Germany as a potential harbinger of change for the fate of Ukrainians, deprived of independence after 1918. Hitler spoke long and often of his desire to remove the "Judeo-Bolshevik regime" in Moscow.

There is no need perhaps to reiterate the oft-told story of the establishment of the two battalions that accompanied the Germans into western Ukraine and the OUN-B-founded, but very short-lived Ukrainian state in Lviv on June 30, 1941. Dr. Melnyk has described the pogroms that followed and the refusal of the German occupiers to share power with the Ukrainian nationalists. Anti-Soviet Ukrainians joined the auxiliary police, and later the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), founded in October 1942 but active from the following spring, particularly against Polish settlements in Volhynia, but later, from 1944, involved in a lengthy guerrilla war against Soviet security forces.

These events demonstrate why Ukrainians looking to the past and those searching for the roots of national identity were always going to have difficulties using the Great Patriotic War as a foundation stone. Ukraine, to a much greater extent than Russia or

Belarus, began to investigate the crimes of the 1930s by Stalin's regime. Having done so, there was a natural tendency to compare Stalinist Communism with Hitlerian Fascism. The war divided Ukrainians from the outset and after 1945, and the anti-Soviet element in Ukrainian political life remained prominent, among the UPA, Gulag inmates, the western Ukrainian population, the more modern Dissident movement and, not least, the Diaspora.

In the independent state, the Holodomor was always perceived as a more unifying issue than the war – with a focus on suffering rather than victory, and with Russians depicted as the alien Other, the perpetrator of the woes of Ukrainians. But a perpetrator could not be a liberator, or for that matter even a friend.

Ukrainians have had a strong Diaspora in North America since the 1890s, but after 1945, it was catalyzed and politicized by the inflow of Displaced Persons from the war, including an important contingent of OUN members who were frequently divided, but strongly anti-Russian. Their arrival coincided with the intensification of the Cold War, so that their political beliefs (often somewhat modified) could be overlooked by Western countries in the quest to combat the Soviet behemoth that was threatening the world. In fact, they would become instant allies of the greatest enemy of the Soviet Union, the United States.

The Soviet Union, on the other hand, adopted new formulas, such as “Ukrainian-German nationalists” (UPA) and most commonly – as noted above – “Ukrainian bourgeois nationalists”, supported by “Anglo-American imperialists” and occasionally by Zionists. All such slogans served to simplify the interpretations of the war in Ukraine.

One feels bound to point out the ironies in the legacy and impact of the war on Ukraine. The start of the war saw the uniting of most Ukrainian territories, completed later with the Soviet annexation of Transcarpathia in June 1945 and the addition of Crimea as a “gift” from Russia in 1954. But it brought heavy losses, including of Ukrainians and Jews caught up in the Holocaust. Repressions and deportations followed in the late 1940s in western Ukraine.

Ukrainians there fought the Nazis, but they fought the Soviets for even longer, into the 1950s.

Though the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) appeared at times to be the most stable of the Soviet republics politically, especially in the lengthy period when Volodymyr Shcherbyts'kyi (1972–89) was the Communist Party leader, various contrary elements remained within society, as did the sense of injustice at Stalin's crimes in Ukraine. Today, there is a battle for the future of Ukraine – perhaps even its future existence – but it is clear that while the modern state is not linked closely to the Soviet past – it has been thoroughly de-Communized – it is still dealing with much of that legacy, including the war years of 1939–45.

One of the great contributions of this book, however, is to return to the war in all its complexity, particularly in the passages on collaborators and on how the perpetrators of one day could become the partisans of the next. The war divided people and unified them, as all wars do. Evil and good are no longer defining qualities if they change daily. And if these traits could appear in people with no apparent contradictions, then the folly of politicizing the war for the benefit of state propaganda is evident.

This book focuses on “the complexity of the processes of nation shaping” and how the Soviet state rebuilt political community in the post-Nazi era. It is about Ukraine, and not Russia. But it is inevitably linked to contemporary events that have seen an unprovoked and savage Russian attack on Ukraine, starting on February 24, 2022, ostensibly to “de-Nazify” and demilitarize Ukraine, though framed in a broader context of unwarranted NATO expansion and alleged Ukrainian threats to the separatist republics formed in the eastern parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

At the time of writing, the author of this book is living in a Russian-occupied village in Kherson in southern Ukraine.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that behind the invasion is the question of historical memory and nation building. The Russian leadership seems obsessed with the legacy of the Great Patriotic War, and in particular its own version of how that war started, developed, and ended. The war elevated Russia as a Great Power –

or perhaps more accurately returned it to that status, reflecting the empire founded by Catherine II, and symbolized by the defeat of Napoleon in 1815, with Tsar Aleksandr I sitting in Paris alongside European leaders deciding the fate of the continent.

Today, as a result of its sacrifices and great victory, Russia, it seems, believes it has the right to deal with its “empire”, whether it be Ukraine, Belarus, or the Baltic states and Poland. The conservative traditionalism of the 19th century lives on in Putin’s autocratic state, which is redefining its “rightful place” in the world, a place it earned by its victory in 1945. Whereas the West decolonized in the 1960s and 1970s, the contiguous Soviet empire lived on, basking in self-glory.

Ukraine is the first victim because it has been taken over by Nazis. Ukrainians, according to Russia’s narrative, are people still following Bandera, the German collaborator. The reader should be aware that this statement is not entirely untrue: there are some Bandera followers in Ukraine and especially in the Diaspora. But in Ukraine they have always been a small minority, and they have never been a factor in the country’s government or leadership. Russia is in any case referring mostly to the uprising of 2014 that saw the departure of pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich.

It appears that Putin anticipated that Ukrainians would welcome the invasion and assist in removing from power Ukraine’s Jewish president Volodymyr Zelensky. The scale and unity of the resistance to the Russian attackers clearly stunned the Russian leaders, who soon redefined their goals and began to focus on occupying all of the Donbas. The misconception says much more about the mindset of the Russian leaders than it does about Ukraine. The war defined Russia because of the power of the post-Soviet state, but not Ukraine, with its competing narratives and its regional and cultural differences.

The Russian invasion has in some respects destroyed the image of the liberators of Europe in 1945. Its savagery and ethnocidal actions can leave no doubt in the minds of the occupied that Russia is the enemy, and such a legacy cannot be easily shed. If Ukraine survives, it will be easier to define its identity and future path, but

that does not change the fact that the state of today is the legacy of the 1939–45 war. To understand today's Ukraine, one needs to comprehend what the war brought to its lands, its consequences and legacy.

Oleksandr Melnyk has written the most comprehensive and well-researched book to date on the impact of the war on the Ukrainian state. It should be required reading not only for students of the Second World War, but also as a background to what is happening today in Ukraine in the tragic year of 2022, over three decades after it gained independence.

David R. Marples
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada
May 30, 2022