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## Bandera: (Re)Building Ukrainian National History

Aaron R. Wolf

*College of the Holy Cross*

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Aaron Wolf

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Bandera: (Re)Building Ukrainian National History

## Introduction

In Ukraine, national history is the subject of high stakes political maneuvering, without a specific view that can be agreed upon. Ukraine has long struggled to define itself as an independent nation with a unique national identity, in part because it was historically used as a battleground for the conflicts of far greater imperial powers, as well as because the territories themselves were ethnically diverse. What we know as Ukraine today was for most of its history a collection of multi-ethnic territories divided amongst several empires. Ukrainian history begins with Kievan Russ in the tenth century, arguably the first time Ukraine held its own identity. After the reign of the Mongol Empire in the thirteenth century, the territories were then divided up between the Russian Empire and the state of Poland-Lithuania. By the twentieth century Ukraine was invaded by the Germans and was eventually incorporated into the Soviet Union. The borders of Ukraine have always been on wheels.<sup>1</sup> Throughout history Ukraine was never truly a nation-state, and since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 it has tried to form its own identity, while still trapped between two competing European powers: Russia and the EU.

At the center of Ukraine's most recent struggles to form a national identity is a man that is remembered as a heroic freedom fighter to some and a genocidal monster to others: Stepan Bandera (1909-1959). An ultra-nationalist Ukrainian partisan, he fought before, during, and even after the Second World War for the creation of an independent Ukrainian nation-state, and was willing to use violent, terroristic methods to accomplish his goal. Whatever their sympathies, most historians agree that he took advantage of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union to begin partisan warfare against the Red Army, while allying himself with the Germans, who many of Bandera's followers saw as liberators. His forces would go on to commit numerous atrocities

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<sup>1</sup> Ishaan Tharoor and Gene Thorp, "Maps: How Ukraine Became Ukraine," *The Washington Post*, Published March 9, 2015.

against native Polish and Jewish populations in the name of creating an ethno-nationalist Ukrainian state. After the war, Bandera fled to West Germany to escape the Soviet invasion and continued working with partisans and other anti-communists to fight against the Soviets until his assassination in Munich in 1959 by an agent of the KGB.

Thereafter cult of Bandera grew amongst the Ukrainian diaspora and spread throughout the West, building him up as a nationalist icon and a staunch enemy of communism. For them the fight for an independent Ukrainian nation outside of the Soviet sphere was still ongoing, as Ukrainian nationalist partisans continued using guerilla warfare against the Red Army in Galicia and Western Ukraine. Since communism was now the next major threat to the West, Bandera and his movement could be packaged in a way that would appeal to Americans and British in need of people to support against the Red Menace. Bandera was emblematic of violent resistance to communism, which, while a positive for the Western powers, was seen rather negatively by the Russians/Soviets. For them, he was still the symbolic leader of anti-communist activity and a supporter of fascism. It is somewhat ironic that during this time both the West and the Soviets emphasized his history fighting against the Red Army, and generally ignored the atrocities that he and his followers committed during the war (or in the case of the Soviets, focused on them insofar as they were crimes against Soviet citizens).

In 2014 a rupture occurred in Ukrainian politics that led to the resurgence of Bandera in the discussion of what constitutes Ukrainian national identity. Some of those in the western territories of the country wanted to use Bandera to try to build up the legacy of Ukraine as being separate from the Soviet Union and Russia. Others, namely members of radical rightwing Ukrainian political parties and affiliations, worship him as a fascist icon while marching through the streets of cities with banners that evoke Nazi imagery. For the Russians (and most eastern

Ukrainians), this twofold use of Bandera's image allowed them to cast all Ukrainian nationalist as Nazis or Nazi sympathizers, drawing a direct line back to the partisans fighting in Ukraine during and after the end of WWII. They could argue that the nationalists are just as threatening now as they were back in the 1940s.

His image casts a long shadow over contemporary Ukrainian politics. He has been embraced by many Western Ukrainians and much of the government as a national hero to be honored and glorified. However, in Eastern Ukraine and Russia he is constantly shown as a Nazi collaborator in an attempt to delegitimize the Ukrainian government, the members of which are simultaneously called "Banderites" (a pejorative term meant to signify them as Nazis).<sup>2</sup> The Russians see him as a way to easily write off the post-Maidan Ukrainian government as fascists in the vein of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN – the organization that Bandera would eventually lead during and after the war), calling forth the myth of the Great Patriotic War in Russian culture.<sup>3</sup> Bandera became a rallying cry for many Ukrainian protesters in the wake of the Maidan revolution to try and counter the Russian government's coverage of the event, which tried to blanketly label the protesters as far-right.<sup>4</sup> It is the crux of a fight being held in Ukraine today over the role the nation will have in the world going forward and whether it will lean culturally and politically towards the East or the West.

How the country will find unity as a nation or gain greater acceptance in the rest of Europe with such a controversial figure at the heart of their new national identity remains to be seen. Yuliya Tsymbal, a twenty-two-year old citizen of the western-Ukrainian city of L'viv,

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<sup>2</sup> "Ukraine Struggles to Reinterpret Its Wartime Past." *The Moscow Times*, Published May 24, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Edele, "Fighting Russia's History Wars: Vladimir Putin and the Codification of World War II," *History and Memory: Studies in Representation of the Past*, Published Sept. 22, 2017, pg. 95.

<sup>4</sup> Ian Bateson, "Ukraine and Poland's History Wars Are a Gift For Putin," *Foreign Policy*, Published Jan. 24, 2017.

views Bandera in a more symbolic sense than as a concrete historical figure. To her, he is symbolic of strength and the powerful belief in an independent Ukraine in the face of suffering and death. Though she disagrees with his methods, she stands by his beliefs, seeing in him a kind of spirit of Ukraine and a man that fought for their freedom in a fight that continues to this day. In her words, the Ukrainians fight for their freedom because they are not weak, and those that are weak are on the side of Russia.<sup>5</sup>

The risk of trying to build a nation around a controversial figure is high, and Yuliya's views are certainly not shared by all. In a poll entitled "Nostalgia for the USSR and Attitude to Individual Figures" taken only months after the Maidan revolution in 2014, almost half of all Ukrainian citizens reported having a negative attitude towards Bandera (48%), while only 31% had a positive one. This gap in public opinion grows wider when divided along geographic lines: 76% of Western Ukrainians have a positive attitude towards him, compared with only 8% in the East (the negative attitudes are 12% and 70% respectively).<sup>6</sup> Based on these numbers, the myth of Bandera, contrary to the stated goals of its propagators, is doing far more to accentuate the divide between East and West Ukrainians than to bridge it. It is being weaponized by both the Ukrainians and the Russians in order to gain sympathy for their sides and justify their political positions. The image of Stepan Bandera as a fighter for a modern Ukraine apart from Soviet influence and the problematic history of Ukrainian nationalism has been and is being shaped today by the politically charged rhetoric and actions of the Ukrainian, Russian, and even Western governments and media.

### Existing Arguments

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<sup>5</sup> Interview with Yuliya Tsybal, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> "Interfax: Almost half of Ukrainians have negative attitude to Bandera – poll." *Interfax*, Published May 6, 2014.

Much of what is said about Bandera, particularly in the last four years since the Maidan revolution and the annexation of Crimea, has been influenced by the political agenda of whoever is saying it. Russian media and sources have continued to parrot lines about him that follow a formula that can be traced back to the Soviet Union. Having been a symbol before, during, and after the war for an independent Ukraine, and having fought the Soviets virulently throughout that time, Bandera and his acolytes were consequently painted as fascists and anti-Semites by the Soviet press in the post-WWII era, responsible for pogroms against Jews and Poles alike in western Ukraine. During the war Soviet Ukrainian newspapers first referred to Ukrainian nationalists negatively as “Banderites,” and Nikita Khrushchev, then first secretary of the Communist Party in Ukraine, called them “Ukrainian-German nationalists” and “Hitler’s Henchmen.”<sup>7</sup> But what was once used for Soviet propaganda has now become another tool in the Russian propaganda machine to incite hatred against the current Ukrainian regime.<sup>8</sup>

Much of this also stems from the way most Russians, particularly President Vladimir Putin, view World War II, or “The Great Patriotic War.” For Russians, their victory over Nazism has become the cornerstone of the kind of “positive nationalism” promoted by Putin that unites citizens through a shared history.<sup>9</sup> It was even enshrined into law in May 2014, most likely spurred on by events in Ukraine, by way of criminalizing certain critical views about the Soviet Union during the war. Known as the “memory law,” any “lies” expressed publicly with the intent to deceive can today land a person with a hefty fine or even jail time.<sup>10</sup> For example, the law was invoked for the first time in December 2014 against a man who shared an article on *Vkontakte*, a

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<sup>7</sup> Rossoliński-Liebe, pp. 363-365.

<sup>8</sup> Josh Cohen, “The Historian Whitewashing Ukraine’s Past,” *Foreign Policy*, Published May 2, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Edele p. 93.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 93-95.

Russian social media site, entitled “15 facts about the ‘Banderovsty,’ or: What the Kremlin is Silent About.” The post claimed that both Germany and the Soviet Union together attacked Poland on September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1939 and begun WWII. Any historian would recognize this post as being essentially correct, in that it was referencing the Nazi/Soviet Non-Aggression Pact of 1939. However, Russian courts declared it libelous on a technicality: the Nazis invaded Poland on the 1<sup>st</sup> of September from the West, but the Soviets would wait for another sixteen days before invading from the East. As such, the court found the post to be a lie, unjustly tarnishing the USSR with what should remain Germany’s exclusive war guilt. They were also able to prove that he shared this article with the intent to deceive by showing that he had achieved the equivalent of a “B” in his high school history course; therefore, he should have known better. He was convicted and fined.<sup>11</sup>

Ukraine, however, can also be accused of promoting certain versions of history as well. For example, Volodymyr Viatrovych, appointed by President Petro Poroshenko to the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory, is currently attempting, many Western journalists and historians claim, to whitewash the history of the OUN and its militarized wing, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA).<sup>12</sup> Viatrovych and his supporters argue that they are only attempting to rectify the historical record in light of Russian propaganda. But in reality, these measures play into the hands of those claiming that the people running the country are Nazi sympathizers. In May 2015 Ukraine even finally broke with Russia on celebrating the end of the Second World War: rather than celebrating on May 9, or “Soviet Victory Day” with the Russians, the Ukrainian government decided to start early on May 8, celebrating “A Day of Remembrance and

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. pp. 90-93.

<sup>12</sup> Cohen.



Reconciliation” with the rest of their would-be European compatriots. They have even stopped referring to the conflict as the “Great Patriotic War,” with President Poroshenko opting instead to use “Patriotic War” to describe the fight against the eastern Ukrainian separatists.<sup>13</sup> The Ukrainian government have even themselves began legislating history to favor their own national myth-making, as will be explored later in this paper.<sup>14</sup> They want to recast Ukraine historically as being victims of the Soviet system, as opposed to the mutual partners that the Russians saw them as. In the current political climate and with the conflict with Russia, those with an interest in furthering the goals of either side tend to either play up the collaborationist nature of the Ukrainian nationalists or downplay it. Bandera, naturally, plays a central role in these debates.

The historiography on Bandera and Ukrainian Nationalism is shaped by the politics of memory; that is, how World War II and Stepan Bandera are viewed by both Ukraine and Russia alike. As demonstrated above, these views are often in conflict with one another. The work of Professor Tarik Cyril Amar is noteworthy for being decidedly critical of Ukraine’s attempts at national myth-making around Bandera and the OUN/UPA.<sup>15</sup> In contrast, scholars such as Timothy Snyder promote a decidedly pro-Ukraine and anti-Russia view of history, specifically defending the reputation of the Maidan revolution as a popular uprising of people from many different backgrounds fed up with the corruption of President Yanukovich, and decrying what he claims is Russian propaganda, claiming that it was all a coup by modern-day Nazis.<sup>16</sup> Combine this with the differing journalism on the Ukraine/Russia crisis that is seen as propaganda on both

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<sup>13</sup> “Ukraine Struggles to Reinterpret Its Wartime Past.” *The Moscow Times*, Published May 24, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> “Poroshenko Signs Legislation Banning Communist, Nazi Propaganda.” *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, Published May 15, 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Tarik Cyril Amar, “Another Conflict in Ukraine: Differing Versions of History,” *Time*, Published Feb. 12, 2015.

<sup>16</sup> Timothy Snyder, “Ukraine: The Haze of Propaganda,” *The New York Review of Books*, Published March 1, 2014.

sides and is constantly trying to invoke history to prove the other side is worse, and trying to get a clear picture of the situation becomes mired in politics and “fake news.”

### Bandera and WWII

To be able to understand the current discourse in Ukraine and Russia about Stepan Bandera and Ukrainian nationalism, one must first understand Bandera himself, the OUN/UPA organization(s) that he supported, and how they have divided Russian and Ukrainian discourse on whether they were fascist collaborators or freedom fighters against the Soviet incursion. Stepan Bandera was born on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1909, to Andrii Bandera, a Greek Catholic Priest, and Myroslava Bandera, who would die of tuberculosis of the throat when Stepan was only twelve.<sup>17</sup> During World War I his father fought for the establishment of an independent Ukrainian state, and due to the death of his mother and the patriotic and religious zeal of his father, Stepan’s upbringing most likely had a decided effect on his political outlook, helping form the conservative idealism that would characterize his nationalism.<sup>18</sup> He was a member of various patriotic youth organizations throughout his schooling years, and after graduating high school in 1927 and beginning his college studies in Lviv officially joined the OUN in 1929. During this time not much studying was to be had, as Bandera himself admitted: “I invested most of my time and energy during my student years in revolutionary national-liberation activities.”<sup>19</sup>

Bandera was not one for conciliatory tactics, and this made him appear admirable to some and heinous to others. Evidently his fanaticism for “national-liberation” developed quite early on in his life, as he was prone to push pins underneath his nails, use an oil lamp to burn himself, and crushed his hands between a door and doorframe, all of which he described as

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<sup>17</sup> Rossoliński-Liebe, p. 91.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. pp. 92-94.

preparation for torture sessions by the Polish authorities that he anticipated could be in his future.<sup>20</sup> After rising through the ranks of the OUN in the early 1930s, Bandera, once commander, required that all members attended military training courses, and that the organization as a whole became more effective at distributing propaganda while increasing terrorist attacks. Bandera also ordered the political assassinations of Poles, Soviet emissaries, and even “traitorous” Ukrainians.<sup>21</sup> Shortly after the Nazis fully came to power, Bandera was arrested and put on trial in Warsaw in 1934. Bandera was convicted along with several of his coconspirators and sentenced to death for his hand in the assassinations of Polish officials, including that of the Polish Minister for the Interior Bronislaw Pieracki, though this was commuted to life imprisonment. After a second trial in Lviv for acts of terrorism, he remained imprisoned until September 1939 when the Germans occupied Poland and leaders of the OUN were released. Due to the assassination of the former OUN leader in 1938 by the Soviets, and with no overwhelmingly popular choice to replace him, the OUN split into two factions: one under Andrii Melnyk, the diplomatic statesman, and the other under the far more radical and violent Stepan Bandera.<sup>22</sup>

Historical debates continue to rage as to Bandera’s direct or indirect involvement with the Nazis. The debates in Ukrainian historical circles center around two events: the creation of two Ukrainian military units under the control of the Germans and headed by Roman Shukhevych (the eventual commander of the UPA), and the declaration on June 30, 1981, of an independent Ukrainian state by Yaroslav Stetsko, a comrade of Bandera’s. At the time of the declaration, Bandera was in Krakow where the Germans had established the Ukrainian Central Committee to

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p. 95.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. pp. 99-100.

<sup>22</sup> Marples, pg. 559-560.

give welfare and organize youth organizations in the General Government (territory encompassing Poland and its west-Ukrainian lands), and headed by Volodymyr Kubiiovych, himself not a member of the OUN but sharing similar political beliefs and trusting that the Nazis were the best allies the Ukrainians could have.<sup>23</sup> It follows that many historians argue that the OUN-B (B for Bandera's wing) were doubtlessly collaborators with the Nazis during this time, citing the declaration by Stetsko claiming that the Ukrainian state would have a direct connection with Germany and that "Adolf Hitler is creating a new order for Europe and the world." Others argue that there are German documents that conclusively show that the OUN-B were fighting the Nazis during this period.<sup>24</sup>

Regardless, what is agreed upon is that after the declaration of Ukrainian Independence on June 30<sup>th</sup>, 1941, the Germans had Bandera and most of the leaders of the OUN-B arrested and detained at the Sachsenhausen concentration camp while disbanding the Ukrainian military formations and executing many other members. Unfortunately for them, Hitler and the Nazi leadership still found the Ukrainians to be members of an inferior race of Slavs and allowing them their own totalitarian state in the vein of Croatia and the Ustaše was never in the cards. Consequently, Bandera would spend a considerable part of the war living in isolation in a concentration camp (though relatively comfortably) while the UPA was formed under Shukhevych, and ultimately would have little if any control or influence over the OUN during the key years of the war. After the war he would remain the nominal leader of the OUN while operating out of West Germany, where he would work with other anti-communist organizations until his death in 1959 in Munich by way of a Soviet assassin.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Rossoliński-Liebe, p. 169.

<sup>24</sup> Marples, p. 561.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, pp. 561-562.

After the war, the myth of the Ukrainian nationalists and the cult around Stepan Bandera began to truly grow. Ukrainian nationalists who had fled to the West wished to convince their newly adopted countries of this myth of the Ukrainian national freedom fighters, and rather than actually change their views and rhetoric to supporting Western liberal democracy, they instead just made crystal clear that they had always supported these values in the first place.<sup>26</sup> Because they were just as anti-communist/Soviet as the West was at the time, the OUN's previous political track record was overlooked in exchange for new allies against the Red Menace. Therefore the OUN emigres could remove any mention of anti-Semitism or fascistic tendencies from their Ukrainian nationalist narrative.<sup>27</sup> The death of Bandera in 1959 sent shockwaves through the Ukrainian diaspora and allowed his supporters to reinvigorate his personality cult, printing articles and obituaries in the many circulated Ukrainian language newspapers in countries such as Great Britain and Canada, hailing him as "a true patriot" and "a national hero." He was shown as "a fearless opponent of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union." Any mention of Nazi collaboration or of the war crimes perpetrated by the OUN/UPA were dismissed as Soviet propaganda, or even as attacks from Poles or Jews.<sup>28</sup>

### Ukraine After Communism

When in 1991 the Soviet Union collapsed, and both Russia and Ukraine found themselves as newly separate nations, the idea of both having separate national identities remained a somewhat alien concept, to foreigners and Ukrainians/Russians alike. Presidents Boris Yeltsin of Russia and Leonid Kuchma of Ukraine remained very close partners during the late nineties, with both being the political kingpins of the oligarchical cronyism that had taken

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<sup>26</sup> Kolinitzky Thesis.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Rossoliński-Liebe, pp. 407-410.

over both of their respective countries. In June 1997, Yeltsin travelled to Kiev to meet Kuchma and finally sign the long gestating “Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership,” with the goal of increasing trade and more closely joining their “military, financial, and tax policy.” Most importantly, and at least somewhat ironic considering current events, the treaty was meant to ensure the “territorial integrity and sovereignty” of the Crimean Peninsula for another decade. Yeltsin said afterward that Russia had no intention of claiming any part of Ukraine and that both are independent democracies. This was all done just a week after Russia signed an agreement recognizing that former Eastern bloc countries have the right to join NATO.<sup>29</sup>

However, the figure of Bandera and the OUN/UPA remained a powerful image of resistance in the Ukraine towards views from Russia that Ukraine was no more than “little Russia,” and that both identities were basically the same. One of the areas that has become a flashpoint in Russian and Ukrainian divergence on history is the great grain famine of 1932-1933, known in Ukraine as the Holodomor. Just as recently as October 3, 2018, as US relations with Russia hit a new low, the United States Senate adopted a resolution that unequivocally states that this famine was an act of genocide on the part of Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin against the Ukrainian people. It passed on the famine’s 85<sup>th</sup> anniversary ostensibly in order to “serve as a reminder of repressive Soviet policies against the people of Ukraine.” This decision on the part of the Senate is most likely a shot across the bow intended to provoke Russia, whose historians have refused to use the word “genocide” to describe the event. They argue that Ukrainians weren’t killed for their nationality that Russian and Ukrainian peasants perished together with farmers of various other ethnicities in what was essentially a war against the countryside, waged

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<sup>29</sup> Floriana Fossato, “Russia: Kremlin Chooses Pragmatic Approach – An Analysis,” *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, Published June 9, 1997.

to allow rapid industrialization of the cities. Currently the EU only refers to the Holodomor as “an appalling crime.”<sup>30</sup> The fight to see the Holodomor recognized as a genocide engineered by the Soviets in as many nations as possible has been the goal for certain Ukrainian organizations since the Ukrainian parliament ratified the law “On the Holodomor of 1932-1933 in Ukraine” on November 28, 2006, namely the Holodomor Victims’ Memorial National Museum. Their website includes a detailed history of the event, an argumentation on why the Holodomor was a genocide based on the UN Genocide Convention of 1948, and a list of all nations, states, and interstate organizations that have in any way legally recognized the Holodomor as a genocide.<sup>31</sup>

In the Putin era, Russia and Ukraine began a more complex relationship. Russia and the EU became Ukraine’s two primary trading partners (first and second respectively). There were many Ukrainians and Russians in Ukraine that wanted a continued close relationship with Russia, but there were many other often younger and urban Ukrainians that wished to break away and gravitated towards Europe. The political upheaval to follow is known as the Orange Revolution.

Indeed, the Orange Revolution itself was an attempt at bringing Ukraine closer to the West, and therefore away from Russia. It centered around the presidential election in November 2004 and the runoff vote on the 21<sup>st</sup> between the prime minister and hand-picked successor to the previous president Leonid Kuchma, Viktor Yanukovych, and the opposition leader and former chairman of the National Bank of Ukraine/prime minister Viktor Yushchenko. Yanukovych was the favorite of the corrupt Ukrainian oligarchs as well as the Kremlin, with massive support in Eastern Ukraine particularly as a result of unanimously positive coverage from the oligarch-

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<sup>30</sup> Najarian, Mark. “U.S Senate Says Stalin ‘Committed Genocide’ In Famine-Hit Ukraine.” *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, Published Oct. 5, 2018.

<sup>31</sup> National Museum “Holodomor Victims’ Memorial,” <http://memorialholodomor.org.ua/eng>

owned cable media stations. Yushchenko, however, had as prime minister built a reputation as one of the only Ukrainian politicians dedicated to honesty and integrity.<sup>32</sup> He also drew his support primarily from Western Ukraine, and favored closer ties with Europe, effectively turning the election into a referendum on Ukraine's geopolitical alignment.<sup>33</sup>

It quickly became clear after the vote, which showed Yanukovich as the victor by a margin of 1.1 million votes, that massive voter fraud had been perpetrated by the Yanukovich campaign. The likelihood of this occurring was born out of over a decade of rampant political corruption in Ukraine since 1991, particularly under the former president Kuchma.<sup>34</sup> But by the early 2000s, thanks to increasing GDP (the effect of Yushchenko's policies) and the rise of the Internet as a new source for news media consumption, a new Ukrainian urban middle class came into being that became more and more aware of the corruption of the political elite and wanted change.<sup>35</sup> The November election and the Orange Revolution (so named as that was the color for the Yushchenko campaign) also became an international event as other nations threw their hats in the ring of support either Yanukovich or Yushchenko. Yushchenko gained the sympathy of much of Europe and the US, whom saw the election as clearly rigged against him, with then Secretary of State Colin Powell even going so far as to say: "If the Ukrainian government does not act immediately and responsibly, there will be consequences for our relationship." Putin backed Yanukovich and when it was decided by the Ukrainian Supreme Court that a fresh round of voting was necessary, he mocked the decision. He accused the US of having a "dictatorial"

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<sup>32</sup> Adrian Karatnycky, "Ukraine's Orange Revoultion," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 84, No. 2, March-April 2005, pp. 40-46

<sup>33</sup> William Schneider, "Ukraine's "Orange Revolution," *The Atlantic*, Dec. 2004.

<sup>34</sup> Karatnycky, p. 38.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* p. 43.



foreign policy as many Russians and eastern Ukrainians believed that the Americans orchestrated and financed the Orange Revolution protests.<sup>36</sup>

### The Maidan Crisis: Russia and Ukraine's Information War

The year 2014 became a turning point in Ukrainian-Russian relations, beginning not just the greatest territorial conflict in Europe this century and effectively a Ukrainian civil war, but also an “information war” between Ukraine and Russia, with the figure of Stepan Bandera playing a key role in defining the political goals of both sides. The post-2014 Poroshenko government ushered in by the Euromaidan protests and revolution, and whose support comes primarily from Western Ukraine, have rallied around the “myth” of Bandera and the Ukrainian Nationalists of the Second World War in the face of growing opposition and rhetoric from the Russians and Eastern Ukrainians as well. This began the Russian media news coverage that attempted to brand Ukraine as a fascist state, run by alleged Nazi sympathizers.

In order to spread their message that Ukraine is a soon-to-be failed state run by fascists, the Russian media, which includes international, English-language outlets such as Russia Today, have painted the Ukrainian government, the Maidan protestors, and West Ukraine as a whole since 2014 in as negative a light as possible, with Bandera and the Ukrainian nationalists forming an easy target for their attacks. After the Russian annexation of Crimea, Putin told the Crimean population that he was rescuing them from the new Ukrainian government, whose members are the “ideological heirs of Bandera, Hitler's accomplice during World War II,” and would be prepared to use violence against ethnic Russians, just like the Nazis and their Bandera

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<sup>36</sup> Schneider.

collaborators had done.<sup>37</sup> As recently as on October 15, 2018, Russia Today posted an article about a left-wing British blogger by the name of Graham Phillips who allegedly travelled to Munich, Germany, in order to desecrate the grave of Stepan Bandera by placing a sign on it that said: “Ukrainian Nazi Stepan Bandera buried here.” Defending himself, he invoked a German law that prohibits the use of swastikas and other Nazi or fascist symbols. The grave was covered in Ukrainian flags, but as others noted, no such symbols. Russia Today used this decidedly small scale event as another excuse to remind their readership of the atrocities of Bandera, and how the Ukrainian state today is more than willing to not only accept him as a national hero to be honored but also to allow rallies in his name of nationalist sympathizers in numerous Ukrainian cities without impediment.<sup>38</sup>

The one striking aspect of this admittedly minor event is that no other news outlets reported on it. The closest equivalent to be found was a similar report by *Business Insider* about Bandera’s grave being desecrated in August of 2014, the night before the German Foreign Minister was to meet with the foreign ministers of France, Russia, and Ukraine to discuss the Ukrainian crisis. In this case the gravestone was said to have been knocked over and soil was removed from the grave. However, RT conceded that the local authorities did not believe that the crime was politically motivated.<sup>39</sup> But this lack of reporting, even on something this inconsequential, is more ammunition for Russian outlets like Russia Today to use against the

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<sup>37</sup> Anthony Faiola, “A ghost of World War II history haunts Ukraine’s standoff with Russia,” *The Washington Post*, Published March 25, 2014.

<sup>38</sup> “‘Nazi buried here’: UK blogger places sign on Ukrainian nationalist icon’s grave in Germany.” *Russia Today*, Published Oct. 15, 2018.

<sup>39</sup> Christine Soukenkal, “Grave of Ukrainian Nationalist Stepan Bandera Vandalized in Germany,” *Business Insider*, Published Aug. 17, 2014.

Western media, painting them as willingly ignoring the problematic history of Ukraine while fascists take over the country.

Russia Today even published an article by a Russia-based Irish journalist entitled “Ukraine has a Nazi problem and a Western media problem.” The article focuses its sights on mainstream media outlets such as CNN, the BBC, The New York Times, and others for not reporting on what it refers to as “Ukraine’s biggest Nazi march of modern times,” and more broadly for employing double standards in their reporting on Ukraine and Russia. This journalist puts forward the argument that Ukraine and Russia are really quite similar, both linguistically and culturally, but that they chose different paths, one effective, which has led Russia to become “an independent Eurasian power,” and the other tragic, which has brought Ukraine economic hardship and allowed it to embrace of Nazi collaborators as national heroes. This argument is also born out of, he argues, the two nations differing attempts to form a national identity out of World War II, with Russia looking to follow in the footsteps of the victors of “the Great Patriotic War,” and Ukraine trying to appear as the victim of Soviet aggression and lionizing resistance fighters with fascist sympathies. Regardless, the author argues that not only are Ukrainian officials complicit in the rise of far-right nationalist groups in the country, but the Western media are as well for not reporting fairly on it in an attempt to keep Ukraine looking more West-friendly in the face of the great enemy Russia.<sup>40</sup>

Generally, outlets like Russia Today seem to look for any and all opportunities to portray Ukraine as far worse off than it was pre-Maidan revolution, while also throwing jabs at the West for their treatment of the Ukrainian crisis. In one Russia Today article published in November

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<sup>40</sup> Bryan MacDonald, “Ukraine has a Nazi problem and a Western media problem.” *Russia Today*, Published Oct. 17, 2017.

2018, Ukraine is evaluated five years after the “western backed” Euromaidan revolution. The article swiftly concludes that the revolution was a “disaster” and “left the country teetering on the edge of becoming a failed state.” It cites the considerable corruption of the Ukrainian government, the comparable poverty of the Ukrainian people with the rest of Europe, and its distinct lack of “European values” now that the rising wave of neo-Nazism has taken to the streets of Ukrainian cities with the tacit approval of Ukrainian officials.<sup>41</sup> In addition, Russia Today even published an article reporting on a sinkhole opening up on a street in Kiev that nearly swallowed a fire engine as it was racing towards an emergency. The article blames the event on the state of disrepair of Kiev’s infrastructure and water pipelines, the fault of an inept Kievan mayor and his government.<sup>42</sup> The crassness with which this occurrence is reported on combined with the banality of the event is indicative of how Russian media will jump at the chance to feather and tar the Ukrainians in the eyes of the world.

As mentioned above, there is more than just a suspicion in these articles that the Western media has a distinct bias and narrative that they are trying to push. In November of 2018 Russia Today reported that the same journalist, Graham Philips, that had vandalized Stepan Bandera’s grave in Munich, had been banned from Twitter despite any evidence of the “hateful content” necessary to be in violation of Twitter’s guidelines. Due to his reporting on eastern Ukraine and perceived bias towards the separatists, Philips had made many enemies, leading to his detainment in May 2014 by the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) and subsequent expulsion from the country. RT has compared his removal from the social media giant with the silencing of

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<sup>41</sup> “Five years on from Euromaidan: Did ordinary Ukrainians benefit from the Western-backed ‘revolution’?” *Russia Today*, Published Nov. 21, 2018.

<sup>42</sup> “Oops! Fire engine rushing to emergency FALLS into sinkhole (VIDEO).” *Russia Today*, Published Nov. 19, 2018.

other “alternative voices” such as Infowars host Alex Jones and leader of the Nation of Islam Louis Farrakhan.<sup>43</sup>

As dictated by the government, Ukraine is in the process of trying to cover up, downplay, or openly rewrite its history while hailing Stepan Bandera and the OUN/UPA as national heroes in order to combat Russian propaganda in the information wars being fought on top of the actual Ukrainian conflict. Taking part in their own kind of propaganda is inconsistent with the pro-West positions of members of the Ukrainian government. Despite this, they try to frame the conflict to better suit their politics; case and point, they honor Bandera and his ilk as freedom fighters, but the eastern-Ukrainian separatists they are fighting must be referred to as “terrorists.” This shaping of history is exemplified in the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory, or UINP, which is responsible for the “implementation of state policy in the field of restoration and preservation of national memory of the Ukrainian people.”<sup>44</sup> Indeed, under the tutelage of Ukrainian historian Volodymyr Viatrovych, its stated main goal is not genuine education about history, but rather to encourage “the development of patriotism and national consciousness among Ukrainian citizens.”<sup>45</sup> In May 2015, President Poroshenko signed a law that gave all of the country’s historical archives including most notably all files collected by the KGB and its Ukrainian successor, the SBU, over to the ministry.<sup>46</sup> The natural fear among historians and other researchers is that an organization that has this much control over essentially the legality of history will inevitably lead the country towards censorship.

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<sup>43</sup> “Liberal journalists rejoice as controversial British blogger Graham Phillips banned from Twitter.” *Russia Today*, Published Nov. 21, 2018.

<sup>44</sup> Cohen.

<sup>45</sup> Gilley, Christopher. “Is the BBC Posting Fake History?” *History News Network*, Published Oct. 28, 2017.

<sup>46</sup> Cohen.

One aspect of this attempt by some Ukrainians to counter Russian propaganda through aggrandizing Bandera is a need to defend their version of history from Western scholars who have made an effort to promote a more critical, but what some Ukrainians claim is simply a more pro-Russian, interpretation of history. For instance, in February 2012, German-Polish historian Grzegorz Rossoliński-Liebe, author of *Stepan Bandera: The Life and Afterlife of a Ukrainian Nationalist*, was scheduled to give talks about his research at academic centers in the Ukrainian cities of L'viv, Kiev, and Dnipropetrovsk; however, all of them were suddenly cancelled. The cancellations have mainly been blamed on intimidation from the nationalistic far-right Ukrainian political party Svoboda and their supporters. They referred to Rossoliński-Liebe as a “liberal fascist,” and a Svoboda politician, Andrii Illienko likened him being a German with being a Nazi and supporting eugenics: “In the past, the Germans told us that we are of inferior race, that our skulls are not the right shape. Now the Germans say that we are of inferior race (today that is called ‘not real Europeans’) because we honor our heroes...”<sup>47</sup> Protesters called him a “ukrainophobe,” a very politically charged term used by the Ukrainian far-right for those that are seen as criticizing Ukraine or being pro-Russia, and “the lying great-grandson of Joseph Goebbels.”<sup>48</sup> While in Ukraine, the author was even put under the protection of the German embassy due to the veracity and violence of the threats against him. Because of the nature of his suppression by activists and the complicity of some Ukrainian historians in his censorship, the international petition “For Freedom of Speech and Expression in Ukraine” was created by concerned historians and researchers and signed by ninety-seven of them.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Per Anders Rudling and Jared McBride, “Ukrainian Academic Freedom and Democracy Under Siege,” *the allgemeiner*, Published March 1, 2012.

<sup>48</sup> Christian Ganzer, “Viel Aufmerksamkeit Für Historische Vorlesung in Kiev,” *Ukraine-Nachrichten*, Published March 23, 2012.

<sup>49</sup> Delphine Bechtel, “Freedom of Speech on Collaboration by Ukrainian Nationalists Against Jews Under Threat in Ukraine,” *WinnipegJewishReview.com*, Published 2012.

Ukraine has also been pumping out their own propaganda that paints Ukrainian nationalists in the OUN and UPA in a more appealing light. This propaganda drive has even affected Western news agencies, giving a certain credence to the Russian claims of western media bias. In March 2017 the Ukrainian wing of the BBC published an article in Ukrainian, translated as: “Ten Myths of the Ukrainian Revolution.” The goal of the article was to debunk these ten “myths” about the revolution in Ukraine that led to the founding of the Ukrainian People’s Republic (UNR), the short lived independent Ukrainian state in conflict with Poland and the Soviet Union between 1917 and 1921, mostly taken from Soviet historiography on the subject. Unfortunately, the refutations are not accurate, and serve only to whitewash the leadership of the UNR, particularly as it relates to pogroms against Jews and Poles at the time. Indeed, the source of the information used to write this article is, in fact, the UINP, though the article makes no attempt to distinguish the views of the UINP and the anonymous author with those of the BBC.<sup>50</sup>

The article is indicative of the most recent work of the UINP in the realm of politics: the drafting and passing of new legislation by the Ukrainian parliament known as the “de-Communization Laws.” In May 2015, President Petro Poroshenko signed into law the legislation, which banned the use of both communist/Soviet and fascist/Nazi symbols in the country, as well as condemning the communist government of 1917 through 1991 as a “criminal regime.”<sup>51</sup> It is now illegal in Ukraine to deny the criminal nature of either the Soviet or National Socialist regimes, publicly and/or through the media. There is most certainly an irony to this legislation, considering that Ukraine was one of the founding members of the USSR in 1917, and

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<sup>50</sup> Gilley.

<sup>51</sup> “Poroshenko Signs Legislation Banning Communist, Nazi Propaganda.” *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, Published May 15, 2015.

it reads like it is meant to gain US/Western approval while infuriating the Russians. But in addition, this first of the pair of laws often overshadows the second, entitled “On the Legal Status and Honoring of the Memory of the Fighters for the Independence of Ukraine in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century,” which contains a list of historical figures and the organizations they belonged to whose memory must be honored and cannot be insulted. This also makes it illegal to publicly deny the “legitimacy of the struggle for Ukrainian Independence.” Volodymyr Viatrovych and the UINP were instrumental in this legislation’s creation, and politician Yuri Shukhevych, son of the leader of the UPA Roman Shukhevych, became the impetus for its passing, ensuring that both his father and Stepan Bandera would legally have to be effectively honored as national heroes.<sup>52</sup>

### Conclusion

The unofficial war between Ukraine and Russia and/or the unofficial civil war within Ukraine continues to this day, and with many throwing around the concept of a second Cold War, how things develop in the region will reverberate throughout Europe and the US. But the concept of nation building, nationalism, and “problematic” history, as well as the different opposing societal forces, each vying for power in shaping their nations or others, remain important in the twenty-first century. There can often be this dichotomy between men and groups who were both responsible for terrible things, but whose actions can be interpreted as being responsible for some good. In the case of Stepan Bandera and the OUN/UPA, there remains some debate between primarily Ukrainian and Russian historians about what took place during the Second World War, with Western historians seemingly caught in the middle depending on their political affiliation. But much of the evidence seems to show that Bandera as an ethno-nationalist willing to use terroristic and even genocidal means to establish an independent

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<sup>52</sup> Gilley, Christopher and Per Anders Rudling. “The History Wars in Ukraine Are Heating Up.” *History News Network*, Published May 9, 2015.



totalitarian Ukrainian state during the years prior to, during, and even sometime after the German invasion of Poland. However misguided the attempts by certain historians and the Ukrainian government are to airbrush this man and his organizations by sweeping under the rug any allusions to anti-Semitism and other fascistic tendencies in order to perpetuate the myth of a national hero that can be used to separate themselves from the sphere of influence of Russia, the goal in and of itself is not completely unwarranted.

Perhaps the question of whether Stepan Bandera was either a Nazi collaborator or a national hero can be answered simply: he was both. That is, historically he and his forces had more of a connection with the National Socialists and their endeavors in creating a new order in Europe than men like Volodymyr Viatrovych would have you believe. But simultaneously, although he is absolutely still seen as a Ukrainian Hitler in Russia and much of Eastern Ukraine, for many Western Ukrainians he has become a symbol of national unity and strength in the face of Russia's increased meddling and belligerence. His image is weaponized on both sides, particularly as both sides want to appeal to the outside world. The Ukrainian government wants the crisis in their country to appear as being part of a new Cold War, while the Russians see it all as playing up the new "Russophobia." On the part of the US and the West, there was and perhaps still is a certain willingness to overlook the crimes of individuals or groups like Bandera and his cohorts so long as an effort is made to appear nominally "democratic" in the face of an "undemocratic" Russian foe. Ultimately, time will tell if the policies of Viatrovych and Poroshenko will bear fruit for the national education and patriotism that they wish to achieve, or if Russia will succeed in sowing such descension within the country that any reference to the Ukrainian struggle for national independence will be seen as just dog whistling to fascists.

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