The Memory War

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FROM MEMORY TO MENDING: LESSONS FROM EASTERN EUROPE FROM GERMANY'S FOREIGN POLICY OF RECONCILIATION

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The Memory Wars among Eastern and Western Ukrainians, in the sense of clashing narratives, has now become a Memory War in the literal sense, threatened by Russia. In claiming that the new government in Kyiv is run by "fascists," President Putin appears to be reliving World War II, when the Soviet Union fought a large-scale and protracted insurgency by Ukrainian "fascists" in Western Ukraine. Soviet victory over "fascist" aggression has long served as the pivotal event legitimizing Soviet rule or, in the past 25 years, Soviet legacy, in the East Slavic heartland of the former Soviet Union – with the exception of Western Ukraine -- and the invocation of the specter of Ukrainian "fascism" strikes a profound emotional chord whose public use could have grave consequences for Russian-Ukrainian and international relations.

The core issue is the wartime insurgency of Western Ukrainians, led by the Ukrainian Insurgency Army (known as UPA in its Ukrainian acronym) and its political arm, the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN, or more specifically, following a split, OUN-B, led by Stepan Bandera). In June 1941, when Germany invaded the Soviet Union, the OUN sided with Germany,

sending members in Werhmacht reconnaissance battalions (some of which served as the backbone of the newly created UPA in early 1943). The OUN proclaimed independence in Lviv on June 30 against Germany's wishes, and became persecuted by the German occupational regime until the winds of war shifted by late 1943. The OUN is presented in the Soviet/Russian/East Ukrainian narrative as an organization that collaborated with the fascists occupiers, and therefore as a fascist organization. The first memory clash is over the legitimacy of Soviet rule. The Ukrainian national narrative asserts that the Soviet occupation of Western Ukraine in 1939 was illegitimate, in violation of international norms (Galicia, in particular, had never been under Imperial Russian or Soviet rule) and that the charge of "collaboration," understood as treason, can hardly apply to residents of a territory itself under an unlawful Soviet occupation.

The second memory clash is over the political nature of the OUN (and UPA). The OUN belonged to the family of far-right political movements that arose all over Europe in the 1930s, built around an all-powerful leader, the promotion of traditional, if not reactionary values, the domestication of civil society institutions and the persecution of political dissent and minorities. Scholars dispute whether the category of "fascism" best applies to the OUN. In memory clashes, however, inasmuch as "fascism," in Soviet/Russian/East Ukrainian discourse, is identified with the Nazis (the dominant trope presents the "Great Patriotic War" as a war against "fascist aggression"), portraying the OUN as Nazis has the strange implication that they shared the Nazi's policy of racial supremacy, a policy characterized by Raphael Lemkin as genocidal against Slavs, including Ukrainians, and aimed at the eradication of the cultural elite, the starving of cities and mass requisition of agricultural products. The OUN was a politically and ethnically intolerant organization, called for a "Ukraine for Ukrainians," targeted civilians, and fought the armed formations of a state that had killed or deported millions of individuals framed as political opponents and deported entire ethnic groups (such as the Crimean Tatars) on the principle of collective responsibility for the crime of collaboration.

The third, and perhaps deeper, memory clash is over the Jews. In early July 1941, the OUN instigated pogroms in major cities of Western Ukraine, including Lviv, echoing the German propaganda line that the Jews were collectively

responsible for the massacre of Ukrainian civilians in secret police (NKVD) prisons a few days earlier. Later on, OUN members serving in the German police played a central role in the destruction of Jewish ghettos (to the dismay of Metropolitan Andrei Sheptytskyi) in Western Ukraine (but far more marginally so in Central Ukraine). With notable exceptions, Ukrainian civil society (incuding historians) and Ukrainian political parties have failed to address what is arguably the most sensitive question in Ukrainian historiography. The greatest psychological impediment is the tendency in Jewish/Russian narratives, and often in Western accounts, to present Ukrainians in primordial terms, as a nation with anti-Jewish predispositions (the cruelest generalization in Jewish narratives being that "the Ukrainians were the worst", meaning worse than the Nazis). The argument of cultural predispositions, however, has been greatly challenged by a cumulative body of international research that suggests that individuals of any ethnocultural background, when placed in extreme conditions, are capable of engaging in the worst atrocities. In the Russian-Ukrainian memory clash, moreover, the denunciation of Ukrainian OUN nationalists as murderous antisemites ignores the Soviet policy of denying the Holocaust as a policy specifically targeting Jews as Jews (as opposed to "Soviet citizens"). The singularity of the Holocaust remains largely absent from official Russian memorialization of the war.

Addressing painful issues of historical memory requires a civic space for dialogue, debates and investigation. Such a space existed under Yushchenko, and even Yanukovych, even though it made little headway in Ukrainian political discourse. With the rise of the far right – Svoboda and Pravyi sector – the civic space is likely to come under a certain degree of duress, if not intimidation, since these groups are certainly in the mode of glorifying wartime insurgents and could significantly influence educational and civic initiatives on war memory. (It is important to note, however, that their actual behavior during the Maidan months and since, in particular regarding Jews, bears no relationship to how they are being portrayed in the Russian media). Meanwhile, the civic space for a process of memory reexamination would appear to be under even greater duress in Russia, under conditions when extraordinary powers are vested in the hand of a single man, with little countervailing institutional checks, and when the Russian President refuses to recognize the legitimacy of Ukraine's government, using a language originating from war memory ("fascism"),

and reserves for itself the right to intervene militarily in Ukraine. When memory wars are verging into an actual war, engaging in the kind of societal introspection that Germany has been experiencing for decades would appear to be exceedingly challenging. •