

## 11 Russia and Ukraine: The Battle of memory and historical Heritage

Are we now living in a post-truth era? This is the crucial question for human and social sciences concerned with the sudden return of war to the European continent, and one I will endeavour to begin exploring in this chapter.

The President of the Russian Federation has continued to argue that the war is justified on historical grounds. However, his rhetoric has nothing to do with seeking ‘historical truth’ and even less the code of ethics observed by any professional historian. In fact, it is an abridged version of the historical falsehoods contained within the article he published a few months before the invasion of Ukraine, on 12 July 2021: ‘On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians.’<sup>672</sup> It is this manipulation and falsification of history that I will analyse.

Such falsehoods are an indication of the contempt for history and the Other (their history, their identity, their culture, their heritage) that is the striking feature of this war. It stems from a longstanding collective depiction of Ukraine that dates back to the birth of the Russian Empire at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and its policy of regional domination. It continued under Sovietism and has been given a new lease of life under Vladimir Putin in the form of various territorial assaults and annexations. The Russia-Ukraine war is not just about territory; it is also about memory. It is a war of culture. It is a reminder that heritage is an element in the matrix forming the representational system of society and is therefore a geopolitical issue. The relationship with memory is indicative of and a potential cause of confrontations based on identity.

My purpose is to examine this notion from the perspective of the symmetry to be found between Putin’s counternarrative<sup>673</sup> of Russia and Ukraine’s history and the problems and failures encountered by the independent Ukraine in its attempt to create its own collective memory and

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672 Vladimir Putin, ‘On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainian’, 12 July 2021. The English version of the document contains 6,885 words. Throughout the document, I have used the official English language version of this chapter for reference: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>

673 I mean ‘alternative narrative’, or ‘false narrative’.

its own heritage – such problems and failures being one of the sources of Russia's counternarrative.

*An example of historical 'gaslighting'*

The article published by the Kremlin on 12 July 2021 is an excellent example of what is today known as 'gaslighting' (*Merriam-Webster's* 2022 word of the year). The term comes from the film *Gaslight* directed by John Cukor in 1944. A man (Charles Boyer) manipulates his wife (Ingrid Bergman), making her believe she is losing her mind in order to steal the precious jewellery she had inherited. By extension, it might be said that it is a form of cognitive hijacking or a hijacking of history/memory in an attempt to invert reality. The aggressor is presented as the aggrieved, accusing the victim of being guilty of a crime they have not committed.

In his article, Putin describes Ukraine as an 'aggressor state' which, he alleges, has forgotten (and betrayed) its historic ties with Russia. He accuses the Ukrainian authorities of *denialism* when his own narrative is a perfect example of denialist construction. He claims that the Ukrainian authorities are suffering from a serious disease ('Nazism', weakness, corruption, negligence, cultural inexistence, lack of identity, etc.). 'Gaslighting' in general is a form of manipulation serving to make the victim doubt their own memory, their heritage, their perception of reality and their mental health. Putin's narrative is in fact a continuation of a longstanding collective depiction of Ukraine as a province of Russia with its own dialect but unworthy of being recognised as a nation state with an indigenous history and culture. This is a strategy seeking to establish subordination.

The combination of gaslighting and denialism is perfectly illustrated in an episode which will go down in history as a disinformation howler. On 23 May 2023, Putin received Valery Zorkin, President of Russia's Constitutional Court, at the Kremlin. Zorkin had something important to reveal to the world. The moment was filmed by the Kremlin and posted on social media. This senior figure from Russia's state institutions indicated a French map of Europe dating back to the time of Louis XIV and explained, 'I would like to take this opportunity to say that we found a copy of a map from the 17<sup>th</sup> century at the Constitutional Court. It was made by the French during the reign of Louis XIV and dates from the middle or the beginning of the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Why have I brought it with me today?

Mr President, there is no Ukraine on this map...' Putin appeared delighted and hastened to recite his anti-history catechism: 'The Soviet Government created Soviet Ukraine. This is very well-known by all. Until that time, Ukraine had never existed in the history of humanity.'<sup>674</sup>

This was the supposed proof that Ukraine did not exist at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century when Russia was already a recognised power. Propaganda is a weapon of mass destruction of the truth. As Peter Pomerantsev wrote, 'Nothing is True and Everything is Possible.'<sup>675</sup>

In my view, it has been difficult for Ukraine to emerge as a nation state because of its complex history. Putin uses this complexity as the basis for his argument that a Ukrainian identity separate from Russia does not exist. It is true that Ukraine's history has been marked by a 'lack of continuity',<sup>676</sup> Before 1991 and access to independence, it is generally accepted that 'Ukrainians' only existed in political and state terms on three occasions: as part of the Kievan Rus between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries; within the autonomous republic of the Zaporozhian Cossacks from the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century; and from 1917 to 1920 in chaotic conditions owing to the war and the Bolshevik Revolution. This is why Ukraine sought to reconstruct its history and redefine its cultural heritage after 1991. However, constructing heritage on the basis of 'heroes'<sup>677</sup> risks falsification, denial and exoneration of the most deplorable episodes in the history of the Ukrainian nationalist movement. Putin has been able to use for his own purposes the excesses and aberrations of the national/nationalist story Ukraine has sought to write to construct a memory-based identity following independence.

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674 <https://www.businessinsider.com/putin-claims-map-proves-ukraine-not-real-despite-saying-ukraine-2023-5>

675 Peter Pomerantsev, *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia*, New York, PublicAffairs, 2014. Pomerantsev was born in Kyiv. He went on to acquire British nationality before becoming a researcher at Johns Hopkins University.

676 Jean-Bernard Dupont Melnychenko, « Naissance et affirmation de la conscience nationale ukrainienne, 1850–1920 », *Matériaux pour l'histoire de notre temps*, No. 43, 1996. « Nation, nationalités et nationalismes en Europe de 1850 à 1920 (II) », edited by René Girault, p. 36. Unless otherwise stated, all translations of cited foreign language material are the translator's own.

677 David R. Marples, *Heroes and Villains: Creating National History in Contemporary Ukraine*. New edition [online]. Budapest: Central European University Press, 2007 (generated on 10 December 2023). Available online: <<http://books.openedition.org/ceup/523>>. ISBN: 9786155211355.

*Ukraine's 'Memorial Building'*

This conflict is also a *conflict of memories* underpinned by two contradictory and clashing readings of history. Putin's aim is to discredit the way in which post-Communist Ukraine is attempting to reclaim its past, liberating it from the Soviet historical narrative. Ukraine has begun the 'nation building' process, i.e. constructing (or reconnecting with) an indigenous historical narrative responding firstly to a pressing need for political, or even ontological, affirmation. I have suggested that this approach might be called 'memorial building'.<sup>678</sup> This does not refer simply to an academic exercise in historical clarification or involve casting a nostalgic gaze over a distant heritage. The aim is to create a collective memory establishing the virtues of national unity, as well as redress for a past which denied Ukraine its right to political/cultural existence and geographical recognition. In this instance, it is my view that the meaning of *memorial* exceeds the usual idea of a monument constructed to represent a memory frozen in time within a tangible object. Rather, this memorial is a (re)founding moment creating a system and a presence through a narrative identity imagined as a resource of resilience and palingenesis. Ukraine's case is unusual – according to the historian Volodymyr Kravchenko, as its existence as a sovereign state has been episodic and limited, it is 'seeking its "golden era" and "usable past" that would provide it suitable symbolic capital for its current nation- and state-building process.'<sup>679</sup> Moreover, it should be noted that to a certain extent its history was 'stolen' as a result of Soviet/Russian cultural domination/colonisation, something demonstrated in school textbooks and Ukraine's scant historiography.<sup>680</sup>

It is important to recognise that Ukraine's memory has long been 'confiscated, if not obscured.' However, it should also be acknowledged that its attempts to reclaim its memory have been 'imperfect': 'In seeking to establish a definitive separation from Russia and highlight the longstanding resistance of a nation, Ukraine has seized upon powerful figures and sym-

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678 Robert Belot, Philippe Martin (eds.), *Patrimoine, Pêril, Résilience*, Paris, Maisonneuve&Larose/Hémisphères, 2022.

679 Volodymyr Kravchenko, 'Fighting Soviet Myths: The Ukrainian Experience', *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*, 34 (1/4), 2015, p. 447–484.

680 Georges Nivat, Vilen Horsky and Miroslav Popovitch (eds.), *Ukraine, renaissance d'un mythe national*, Proceedings of the Poltava Conference edited by the Institut européen de l'Université de Genève, Geneva, 2000.

bols from its tormented past. Although considered heroic, some of those individuals nonetheless remain controversial.<sup>681</sup>

Ukraine's quest for pre-Russian origins and its attempt to create a new national mythology were reflected, for example, in Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's decision to award the Order of Prince Yaroslav the Wise to Thomas Bach, President of the International Olympic Committee, on 11 September 2021. Brought to power by the Polish, Yaroslav the Wise (1019–1054) reigned at a time when the Kievan Rus was at its peak. The fact that he was nicknamed 'father-in-law of Europe' speaks volumes.<sup>682</sup> In 2008, viewers of a popular Ukrainian television programme voted him 'greatest Ukrainian of all time' and his achievements were depicted in a film two years later. In this instance, the aim was to provide a narrative that, unlike Putin's, did not freeze Ukraine's history in 1654 (the date of the Pereyaslav Agreement), the year which marked the beginning of Russia's attempts to subordinate the Kievan Rus.<sup>683</sup>

However, its other borrowings from the past have been more problematic. Some of its 'revivals' (such as Stepan Bandera and Symon Petlyura for example) have caused a scandal and bolstered Putin's narrative of the 'Nazification' of Ukraine and the need to 'denazify' its history. It is accepted that national identities are not natural but rather 'constructions'.<sup>684</sup> All forms of nationalism are a construction of a founding myth where history is pieced together and arranged into the correct order. All forms of nationalism, both in the past and today, worship at the altar of the 'idol of origins' to quote Marc Bloch in his wise *Apologie pour l'histoire ou métier d'historien*. To borrow the distinction made by the American historian Timothy Snyder, 'modern' forms of nationalism seek to establish *ex-post* historical/cultural linearities with 'proto-modern nations', at the risk of resorting to 'metahis-

681 A remarkable conference was held in Poltava in the spring of 1997. Its proceedings were published in Geneva in 2000, i.e., before Putin's regime. It was the first entirely independent attempt by academics to shed light on Ukrainian history and its relationship with Russia. See also: Bertrand de Franqueville & Adrien Nonjon, 'Mémoire et sentiment national en Ukraine', *La vie des idées*, 17 May 2022: [lavedesidees.fr](http://lavedesidees.fr)

682 James S. Olson (ed.), *An ethnohistorical dictionary of the Russian and Soviet empires*, London, Greenwood Press, 1994, p. 676.

683 However, it should be acknowledged that protection was required against the Polish who were pursuing an expansionist policy at that time.

684 See Anne-Marie Thiesse, *La création des identités nationales. Europe, XVIII<sup>e</sup>-XX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, éd. du Seuil, 1999.

torical' myths<sup>685</sup> or, as Henry Corbin (Martin Heidegger's translator) put it, 'hiero-historical' myths.<sup>686</sup> In this instance, Ukrainians want to suggest that they are the only heirs to the Kievan Rus. At the centre of pan-Russian nationalism lies the ancient myth of the Russian 'triune' created by metropolitan and archbishop Feofan Prokopovich (1681–1736), a professor at Kiev Mohyla Academy. He was adviser to Peter the Great who had given himself the title of 'Tsar of Great, Little and White Russia.' This historical myth has surfaced again today as the basis for Russia's ancient 'right' to possess Ukraine.<sup>687</sup>

### *Cultural war and battle for origins*

In his article 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians', Russia's President proposes a counternarrative of the history of Russia and Ukraine's relationship.

Russia's current official narrative rests on a presupposition that Putin presents as historically undeniable: 'historical unity between Russians and Ukrainians.' In brief, Ukrainians and Russians form 'one people – a single whole' whose separation can be explained only by Western strategy, thanks to which 'step by step, Ukraine was dragged into a dangerous geopolitical game aimed at turning Ukraine into a barrier between Europe and Russia.' According to Putin's reading of history, at the centre of this unity lies the ancient Rus.<sup>688</sup> This was not purely a political space. It was also, according

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685 Timothy Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1559–1999*, Newhaven, Yale University Press, 2003, p. 28–29.

686 Riyad Dookhy, « Un messianisme historial? », *Les Cahiers philosophiques de Strasbourg* [Online], 37 | 2015, placed online on 3 December 2018, consulted on 15 April 2024. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/cps/480>; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/cps.480>.

687 On the history of this myth and its historical manipulations, see: Denis Eckert, « D'où vient l'idée que Russes et Ukrainiens forment un seul peuple? », *Mondes sociaux*, published on 04/04/2022, <https://sms.hypotheses.org/29931>. Denis Eckert also translated a seminal book by Andreas Kappeler (in German): *Ungleiche Brüder: Russen und Ukrainer vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart*, Munich, CH Beck, 2017.

688 'Rus' (in the era of the Kievan Rus) referred to the Rus' itself (the lands of Kyiv and Chernihiv). 'All Rus' referred to the lands governed by the Princes of Kyiv whose power was relatively real. See also: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/05/myths-and-misconceptions-debate-russia/myth-11-peoples-ukraine-belarus-and-russia-ar-e-one>

to Putin, a religious space. He writes: ‘and – after the baptism of Rus – the Orthodox faith. The spiritual choice made by St. Vladimir, who was both Prince of Novgorod and Grand Prince of Kiev, still largely determines our affinity today.’ That is why 28 July has been a national holiday in Russia since 2009. It celebrates the ‘baptism of Russia’ which, it is claimed, took place on 28 July 988. The problem is that the principality of Kiev was not Russia which did not yet exist at that time, or only in an undetermined form.<sup>689</sup> According to Putin, it is the West who ‘in recent years’, supposedly built a ‘wall’ between the two countries which, he purports, formed ‘the same historical and spiritual space’. For Putin, this wall is ‘a great common misfortune and tragedy’ because, as he puts it, the axiom that ‘Ukraine is not Russia’ is a Western invention, a manipulation, a negation of history. It is this axiom that he seeks to deconstruct. His purpose is therefore both historical and messianic: he seeks to recreate the unity of two peoples certified by history... by declaring war on Ukraine.

It should be noted that Vladimir Putin did not invent this ‘myth’. According to the researchers (mostly Ukrainians) who attended the Poltava conference in 1997, it became set in stone during the Soviet era: ‘Canonical Soviet textbooks brazenly falsified history – consider for example [...] the entirely false “theory” of the earlier existence of a united nation composed of Russians, Ukrainians and Belorussians.’<sup>690</sup>

Ukrainians have taken action against such a historical annexation. In 2021, Ukraine celebrated the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its independence and President Volodymyr Zelensky decreed that 28 July would be a public holiday known as ‘the Day of Ukrainian Statehood.’<sup>691</sup> It was marked for the first time on 28 July 2022, i.e., five months after the Russian invasion. In

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689 Vladimir Berelowitch, « Les origines de la Russie dans l’historiographie russe au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle », *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, vol. 58, No. 1, 2003, p. 63–84. The city of Kyiv’s culture sparkled while Moscow was in limbo. In the middle of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, it was a small village on the banks of the Moskva. What became Russia was under Mongol rule. Prince Alexander Nevsky only managed to make Moscow an independent principality in 1263. It would quickly go on to compete with its neighbours.

690 And the quotation continues thus: ‘... and the total omission of the famine from 1932 to 1933, as well as the falsification of the history of the Second World War (not a word on the rebel Ukrainian army or the millions of Ukrainians held in captivity.’ Leonid Finberg, ‘Rapports entre Ukrainiens et Juifs : comment la mythologie remplace la réalité’, *Ukraine, renaissance d’un mythe national*, op.cit., p. 148.

691 <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/den-ukrayinskoyi-derzhavnosti-28-lipnya-uvverdzhuvatime-zvyia-76645>



June 2023, the Ukrainian Parliament voted to move the Day of Ukrainian Statehood from 28 July to 15 July, not only to avoid clashing with the date chosen by the Russians but also in an abandonment of the Julian calendar in favour of the Gregorian one. On 28 July 2024, Zelensky issued a decree that moved the Christmas public holiday to 25 December (instead of 7 January) in an attempt to end Christmas' alignment with the liturgical calendar of the Russian Orthodox Church, i.e., 7 January. It is evident that Ukraine's symbolic and historical heritage is far from set in stone and very much a political issue.

Ukraine's desire to reclaim its memory of the principality of Kiev (where Ukrainian culture originated) was evident in France back in 2005. Viktor Yushchenko, then President of Ukraine, visited Senlis to inaugurate a statue erected in memory of Anne of Kyiv, Queen of France, who was suddenly thrust into the media spotlight. In 1051, Anne of Kyiv, daughter of Yaroslav the Wise (978–1054), Grand Prince of Kiev, Prince of Novgorod and Prince of Rostov, and his second wife Ingegerd of Sweden, married Henry I, King of France. Henry I (1008–1060) was the third of the Capetian line. A Kievan woman was therefore indeed Queen of France.<sup>692</sup> This demonstrates the importance of the Kievan Rus, its influence and its place at the heart of Europe in the Middle Ages.<sup>693</sup> That is why the Ukrainian authorities today present Yaroslav the Wise as a European pioneer and the 'greatest Ukrainian of all time', while feeding 'the myth of the constant ambition of reunification.'<sup>694</sup>

In Putin's supposedly historical article, the 'triune' myth enables him to diminish (even deny) Ukraine's Polish past ('the Republic of Two Nations'), as well as its Austrian past, despite Galicia being the home of Ukraine's cultural and political nationalism.<sup>695</sup> With a sweep of his hand, he dismisses

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692 Régine Desforges reimagines his fate in the form of an historic novel: *Sous le ciel de Novgorod*, Paris, Fayard, 1990.

693 Yaroslav the Wise ordered the construction of the Cathedral of Saint Sophia in Kyiv. The first code of justice, a source of medieval law, was produced during his reign: *Rousskaïa Pravda*.

694 Natalia Iakovenko, 'Modifications du mythe national ukrainien dans l'historiographie', in *Ukraine, renaissance d'un mythe national*, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

695 Isabel Röskau-Rydel, « La société multiculturelle et multinationale de Galicie de 1772 à 1918 : Allemands, Polonais, Ukrainiens et Juifs », *Annuaire de l'École pratique des hautes études (EPHE), Section des sciences historiques et philologiques* [Online], 139 | 2008, placed online on 26 November 2008, consulted on 20 November 2023. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ashp/469>; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ashp.469>



'the old groundwork of the Polish-Austrian ideologists to create an "anti-Moscow Russia"'. Is Ukraine's Austrian history really an 'invention'? It is this denial of history which leads him to annex Ukraine's cultural heritage. I will consider two examples Putin refers to in his article.

*A divisive 'common literary and cultural heritage'*

One writer in particular has been caught up in a diplomatic paternity dispute: Nikolay Gogol (1809–1852), author of *Taras Boulba*, a famous novella. Gogol came from an old Cossack family (in the Poltava region) but left for St Petersburg to pursue his literary career. He always wrote in Russian – at that time, how could a writer succeed outside Russia's rapidly developing literary circles? Russia was a dominant and recognised power, including culturally. So, for some people Gogol is Russian; for others he is Ukrainian. Vladimir Putin is happy to use him in his article to advance his argument: 'The books of Nikolay Gogol, a Russian patriot and native of Poltavshchyna, are written in Russian, bristling with Malorussian folk sayings and motifs.'<sup>696</sup> How can this heritage be divided between Russia and Ukraine? And why do it?

This paternity dispute came to light on the day marking the bicentenary of Gogol's birth in 2009, i.e. before the occupation of Crimea and the war. Some of Gogol's work had been republished in Ukrainian and Russia (a Russian state television channel) accused Kyiv of trying to 'Ukrainianise' the anniversary. Russian Gogol specialists criticised the fact that the adjective 'Russian' had been systematically replaced with 'Ukrainian' or 'Cossack'. In point of fact, the Western half of the country stopped studying Russian in 1991 so Gogol was no longer read. The new edition in Ukrainian sought to resolve that problem. However, in such a highly sensitive atmosphere translations can become controversial and political. Should it not be considered that Gogol represented a powerful weapon for those who sought to denigrate Ukraine's autonomous existence?<sup>697</sup>

In seeking to reclaim its history and its culture, Ukraine has showcased a figure from Ukraine's cultural renaissance: Taras Shevchenko (1814–1861),

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696 *Malorussia* refers to Ukrainian 'little Russians'.

697 Iryna Dmytrychyn, « Voyage dans l'Ukraine de Gogol », *Revue de littérature comparée*, 2009/3 (No. 331), p. 283–294. DOI: 10.3917/rlc.331.0283. URL: <https://www.cairn.info/revue-de-litterature-comparee-2009-3-page-283.htm>

a painter and poet but also a Ukrainian hero and martyr. He sought to codify Ukrainian grammar and establish modern Ukrainian literature. As a result, he was sent to prison and subsequently lived in exile in St Petersburg where he died.<sup>698</sup> For the Russian authorities, literary activities and young intellectuals posed a threat. A report from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century included the following wonderful homage to the power of culture and ideas:

‘In Ukraine, Slavophiles have become Ukrainophiles. The members of this brotherhood wanted to separate Ukraine from Russia. Of all its members, Shevchenko is the most dangerous because, as a poet, he can speak directly to the popular masses.’<sup>699</sup>

Shevchenko criticised the Russian Empire’s policy of subjugation and became a symbol of cultural resistance in Ukraine. Two years after his death, a memorandum from the Russian Government decreed that ‘there has never been, there is not and there cannot be any specific “little Russian” language.’ And yet, specialists have confirmed that ‘although all the Slavic languages are very similar, Ukrainian is closer to Polish than Russian in some respects.’ Ukrainian cannot be reduced to simply a dialect of Russian.<sup>700</sup> The Ems Ukaz was a perfect example of this repressive policy. The decree accused Ukrainians of wanting to live in a free Ukraine ‘in the form of a republic led by a hetman.’ Alexandre II (1818–1881) outlawed the printing of books in Ukrainian, the importing of Ukrainian books into the Russian Empire, the creation of original works in Ukrainian, and the translation of foreign language texts into Ukrainian. The prohibition would remain in force until the 1905 Revolution.<sup>701</sup>

Putin refers to Shevchenko in his article but only to state that, although his poems were mostly written in Ukrainian, he wrote ‘prose mainly in Russian’, making him part of ‘our common literary and cultural heritage.’ Thus does he deny Shevchenko’s symbolic place in Ukraine’s popular ima-

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698 Christianity was introduced into Kievan Rus’ by the monk Cyril who translated Byzantine religious documents into the Slavonic language and introduced the Cyrillic alphabet.

699 Roger Portal, *Russes et Ukrainiens*, Paris, Flammarion, 1970, p. 45.

700 Iaroslav Lebedynsky, « La Russie a entretenu le mythe de l’inexistence de l’Ukraine », *Science et Vie*, 24 February 2023. <https://www.science-et-vie.com/article-magazine/la-russie-a-entretenu-le-mythe-de-linexistence-de-lukraine>

701 After the first Russian Revolution in 1905, Nicolas II published a manifesto promising to respect nationalities.

gination and, above all, bolster the myth of the triune. Ukrainians would go on to revolt against such a Tsarist assimilationist policy and fight for their culture to be respected. However, Putin sweeps this to one side for two reasons: firstly, he believes that all national demands stem from nationalism and therefore from 'Naziism'; and secondly, anything that does not follow the myth of fusional unity between the two countries is rejected out of hand. It is his belief that this policy should be interpreted in light of the 'historical context' which he alleges demonstrates that Ukraine's national claims are purely a result of geopolitical manipulation by Russia's enemies, a 'tool of rivalry between European states.' In the past, this destabilisation operation had been led by the 'Polish national movement' and the 'Austro-Hungarian authorities.'

In his article, Putin completely ignores great national literary figures from western Ukraine with a connection to the University of Lviv such as Mykhaylo Petrovitch Drahomanov, Taras Shevchenko and Ivan Franko. He forgets Yakiv Holovatsky and Markiian Chachkevych who is recognised for adopting the civic Cyrillic alphabet to transcribe the Ukrainian vernacular into an accessible written language.

The only intellectual he does cite is Mykhaylo Hrushevsky (1866<sup>702</sup>-1934), one of the Galician exiles. This Ukrainian historian (and politician<sup>703</sup>) is often referred to as the 'father of Ukrainian historiography.'<sup>704</sup> He helped crystallise the 'return to the paradigm of the standard national myth' (Natalia Iakovenko<sup>705</sup>). Independent Ukraine's ambition to reclaim its historical heritage has also been constructed around him. Consider for example the extravagant festivities that were held in independent Ukraine in 1996 to mark the 130<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death. Hrushevsky chaired the Shevchenko Scientific Society<sup>706</sup> (named after the man who invented the Ukrainian language), the organisation at the heart of an international

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702 He was born in Chełm, Poland.

703 Hrushevsky was a politically engaged intellectual. A member of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, he became president of the central Rada (parliament) at the time of the 1917 revolution and, in 1918, president of the ephemeral Ukrainian People's Republic, after which he had to seek exile in Vienna. He returned to Kyiv as an academician and was arrested in 1931.

704 The following spelling is also used, including in Putin's article: Mikhaïl Grouchevski.

705 Or 'Yakovenko'.

706 [https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Gazetteer/Places/Europe/Ukraine/\\_Topics/history/\\_Texts/DORSUH/22\\*.html](https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Gazetteer/Places/Europe/Ukraine/_Topics/history/_Texts/DORSUH/22*.html)

network promoting the idea of Ukraine's own culture. In 1894, Mykhaylo Hrushevsky was appointed the new Chair of Eastern European History in Lviv, Galicia. He used his freedom and academic unction to deconstruct the official Russian narrative based on the 'uninterrupted continuity' of the Russian state since the Middle Ages. He brought about an intellectual revolution by postulating that the Rus of the 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries were historically and culturally indigenous and that the Kievan Rus had its own specific and authentic history, independent of that of Russia. He wrote an 11-volume *History of Rus-Ukraine*, a monumental enterprise. The first volume was published in 1898. He was one of the first to attempt to present a historical foundation for the Ukrainian nation to provide some perspective with regard to what he called the aspiration for 'a shared national life.' Mykhaylo Hrushevsky was therefore someone who represented a total refutation of Russia's anti-Ukrainian counternarrative. As Timothy Snyder underlined, he offered Ukraine 'a base for its political rejection of Russian pretensions.'<sup>707</sup> That is why Putin symbolically sets about to destroy him, presenting him as a traitor to his cause. Putin lets it be understood that this emblematic figure of Ukrainian nationalism actually abandoned his political battle and returned to Russia at the end of his life in an act of disloyalty to his cause:

'In the 1920's-1930's, the Bolsheviks actively promoted the "localization policy", which took the form of Ukrainization in the Ukrainian SSR.'<sup>708</sup> Symbolically, as part of this policy and with consent of the Soviet authorities, Mikhail Grushevskiy, former chairman of Central Rada, one of the ideologists of Ukrainian nationalism, who at a certain period of time had been supported by Austria-Hungary, was returned to the USSR and was elected member of the Academy of Sciences.'

In Ukraine, the de-Sovietisation of its heritage became a de-Russification operation. Monuments dedicated to Alexander Pushkin were demolished (such as in the city of Uzhhorod in April 2002) and the Government sought to 'purify' public libraries.

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707 Timothy Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations...*, *op.cit.*, p. 197–198.

708 Soviet Socialist Republic.

Putin: 'de-Nazifier' of Ukraine's memory

Ukraine has showcased a number of heroes in its attempts to rebuild its memory and its heritage. Patriotic heritage has always been shaped by figures it is hoped are iconic. In Ukraine, this tradition is still evolving following the wave of demolitions. It seems that the myth of the hero has had its time – which in itself is no bad thing. However, the 'heroes' Ukraine has dusted off and brought out of its pantheon are not glorious and have triggered significant dissent. Consider, for example, one 'independence hero': Symon Petlyura. Accused of covering up unspeakable antisemitic pogroms in 1917 and 1918, he was killed by a Russian Jewish anarchist in Paris in 1926.<sup>709</sup> President Viktor Yushchenko's visit to his grave at Montparnasse Cemetery in Paris in May 2006 caused a scandal, not least in France itself.

Another 'hero' (this time from the Second World War) is the focus of Putin's criticism. It must be said that it is a complicated and unsavoury case. It mainly serves to enable Putin to justify his campaign of presenting his war as an operation to 'denazify' Ukraine. At the heart of his anti-Nazi argument is the figure of Stepan Bandera, considered a leading Ukrainian Nazi sympathiser. This is what Putin writes: 'Bandera, who collaborated with the Nazis, ... [is] ranked as ... [a] national [hero].'<sup>710</sup> Everything is being done to erase from the memory of young generations the names of genuine patriots and victors, who have always been the pride of Ukraine.'

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709 Léon Poliakov, 'Petlioura : la dignité d'un mythe', *Information juive*, October 1986. Léon Poliakov did not support the theory that Petlyura was anti-Jewish. It was his view that media coverage of the Petlyura trial (in 1927) first and foremost reflected Comintern propaganda which saw it as a way to discredit Ukrainian nationalists and justify the domination of Ukraine. See also: Henry Abramson, *A Prayer for the Government: Ukrainians and Jews in Revolutionary Times, 1917–1920*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999; Lidia Miliakov ed., *Le livre des pogroms. Antichambre d'un génocide. Ukraine, Russie, Biélorussie, 1917–1922*, French edition produced by Nicolas Werth, Mémorial de la Shoah-Calmann-Lévy, 2010; David Engel, *The Assassination of Symon Petliura and the Trial of Scholem Schwarzbard 1926–1927. A Selection of Documents*, Bristol (USA), Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016.

710 In fact, 'on 2 April 2010, a month after former prime minister Viktor Yanukovich was elected head of the State of Ukraine, the Administrative Court of Donetsk overturned and rescinded former president Viktor Yushchenko's decree making Stepan Bandera and Roman Shukhevych Heroes of Ukraine. It argued that even posthumously this title could only be bestowed on citizens of the State of Ukraine which had only existed since 1991. The ruling was immediately confirmed upon appeal on 21 April 2010.' <https://timenote.info/fr/Roman-Choukhevych-30.07.1907>

The decision taken by the city of Kyiv in 2016, two years after the annexation of Crimea, to rename Moscow Avenue 'Stepan Bandera Avenue' immediately after the Decommunisation Laws adopted in 2015 has come under much scrutiny.

The way in which western Ukrainians welcomed the German army as liberators in 1941, co-ran the occupation and participated in the slaughter of the Jews is problematic, as is the underwhelming attention given to Holocaust memorialisation.<sup>711</sup> Stepan Bandera (1909–1959) led the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN). He was born on 1 January 1909 in Kalush, Galicia, a province in the east of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Like others, he sought to collaborate with the Germans against the Soviet Union to lead Ukraine towards independence. The anti-Judaism of the Nazis was not entirely displeasing to him. Ukrainian nationalists quickly realised that the Germans (who funded their movement) had no intention of helping an independent Ukraine to emerge. Bandera was imprisoned at a German concentration camp from 1941 to 1944 after attempting to establish an independent Ukrainian government. It should be noted that he was poisoned by a KGB agent in 1959 in Munich.

Putin brandishes the effigy of Bandera to suggest that modern Ukraine has learnt nothing from history and is falling victim to its old nationalist demons once again. This position was the reason for the Russian Government's manipulation of the UN on 16 November 2017 to hold a vote on its draft resolution against 'the glorification of Nazism.'

Nonetheless, Ukraine should have avoided leaving itself wide open to the often-justified criticism that it has been 'laundering'<sup>712</sup> the darkest episodes in its history and rehabilitating 'questionable', or even shameful, figures. Consider, for example, a man like Roman Shukhevych, leader of the Nazi 'Nachtigall' battalion (created in Krakow in March 1941). His virulent

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711 John-Paul Himka, 'Obstacles to the Integration of the Holocaust into Post-Communist East European Historical Narratives', *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 50 (3–4), 2008, p. 359–72. See: Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*, New York, Basic Books Perseus Books Group, 2012; Marc Sagnol, « Lieux oubliés de l'Holocauste en Ukraine. Berezovka, Domaniekva, Bogdanovka », *Mémoires en jeu. Revue critique interdisciplinaire et multiculturelle sur les enjeux de mémoire*, 29.04.2021. <https://www.memoires-en-jeu.com/sites-lieux/lieux-oublies-de-lholocauste-en-ukraine-berezovka-domaniekva-bogdanovka/>

712 Delphine Bechtel, « Mensonges et légitimation dans la construction nationale en Ukraine (2005–2010) », *Écrire l'histoire* [online], 10 | 2012, placed online on 18 December 2015, consulted on 10 December 2023. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/elh/199>.

anti-Polish perspective was only equalled by his treatment of Jews in Galicia where he committed mass murder.<sup>713</sup> He was made a 'hero of Ukraine' on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth in 2007.<sup>714</sup> Ukrainians themselves were bitterly divided over this issue. In 2017, for example, it even led to scuffles in the street.<sup>715</sup>

However, the rehabilitation process had begun. In 2019, the Ukrainian city of Kalush unveiled a monument in honour of Shukhevych, provoking a joint reaction from the Ambassadors of Israel and Poland. In March 2021, the city of Ternopil in Ukraine renamed its football stadium after that symbol of Nazi collaborationism. The Simon Wiesenthal Center had no choice but to react and requested that FIFA condemn the decision. And yet, in July 2021 Yulia Laputina, the Veterans Affairs Minister, did not hesitate to pose for pictures with a member of Pravy Sektor<sup>716</sup> in front of a portrait of Roman Shukhevych.

The Holocaust is now well-documented in Ukraine. However, a heavy-weight study by the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum) in 2013 was disturbed by Ukraine's revisionist approach to 'the invention new heroes and martyrs.'<sup>717</sup> For example, the scenography of Lviv's Historical Museum was altered in 2006 to tone down suggestions of collaboration. The Nazi 'Nachtigall' battalion became the 'Division of Ukrainian Nationalists'; the SS 'Galizien' Division became the 'Ukrainian Division Halychyna'.<sup>718</sup> Ukraine should have foregone a non-discrimination policy in its attempts to restore its national heritage

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713 In August 1943, Shukhevych was appointed Supreme Commander of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA). In some biographies, he is presented as having been an 'Abwehr agent from 1937'.

714 He was awarded this title by President Yushchenko on 14 October 2007 during commemorations marking 65 years of the UPA. The decision would later be rescinded by the courts.

715 According to a 2009 opinion poll conducted by Ivan Katchanovski, a Ukrainian researcher teaching at Ottawa University, 'only 13 % of people questioned had a positive impression of the UPA; approximately 45 % of Ukrainians had a negative impression of the insurgent army,' <https://ici.radio-canada.ca/rci/fr/nouvelle/2013410/choukhevych-honore-canada-heros-national-ukrainien-ou-criminel-nazi>

716 A small far-right party founded in 2014.

717 Delphine Bechtel, "The 1941 pogroms as represented in Western Ukrainian historiography and memorial culture", in "The Holocaust in Ukraine. New Sources and Perspectives", Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum), 2013, p.7. <https://www.ushmm.org/m/pdfs/20130500-holocaust-in-ukraine.pdf>.

718 Halychyna is Ukrainian for Galicia.



and history. Doing so would have avoided providing Putin with one of the most aggressive themes of his propaganda. Condemning the Putin regime's falsification of history does not exonerate Ukraine from providing clarity about its own history.

Putin's denazification argument is fuelled by the policy of Ukrainian governments to de-Sovietise the country's heritage. When Petro Poroshenko enacted laws 'prohibiting Soviet symbols and condemning the Soviet regime' in 2015 (resulting in the toppling of several statues of Lenin), Moscow made its hostility clear – as if the memory of the Soviets' heroic struggle against Nazi Germany should mean that Ukrainians could not pass a critical eye over the Sovietisation policy they had had to endure. That is why, for example, Putin rejects the idea that Holodomor was a 'genocide'.<sup>719</sup> However, the fundamental question is whether Russians believe that Ukraine, as an independent country, should have the freedom to manage the public symbols of its own heritage and the right to propose its own historical narrative.

### *Conclusion*

Russia's centuries-long policy of culturally colonising Ukraine clearly casts a long shadow over this report with its focus on heritage. According to Putin, Ukraine's claim that its culture and heritage are autonomous is equivalent to negating its own past:

'Ukraine's ruling circles decided to justify their country's independence through the denial of its past, however, except for border issues. They began to mythologize and rewrite history, edit out everything that united us, and refer to the period when Ukraine was part of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union as an occupation.'

The Russia-Ukraine war is also a symbolic war launched on the basis of a political exploitation of history, the other principal victim of this tragedy. It is therefore Ukraine that is supposedly betraying the shared history of two peoples – as if there were no history for Ukrainians outside the great Russian narrative; as if Ukraine had never existed without Russia. Russians

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719 In 2006, President Viktor Yushchenko enacted a law to remember the victims of the famine and punish anyone who contested its genocidal nature. The National Museum of the Holodomor-Genocide was opened in Kyiv in 2008 on the right bank of the Dnieper River.

are using history and heritage as a weapon to make Ukraine culpable and to negate its history. Such is the anachronistic reflection of its longstanding cultural and political colonisation. The observation that Ukraine's history may contain some aberrations does not give Russia the right to consider the creation of Ukraine's own popular imagination and its own national story illegitimate.

Vladimir Putin opposes a national rereading of Ukrainian history because it calls into question the narrative in which he very possibly believes, where Soviet Russia is Ukraine's benefactor. Moreover, Ukraine's policy of asserting its identity (despite the many ambiguities therein) has put it on a collision course with the meta-historical myth of 'Great Russia'<sup>720</sup> which Putin is somehow attempting to bring back to life with limited means. The historian Timothy Garton Ash recalls visiting St Petersburg at the beginning of 1994 and meeting Vladimir Putin who only held a municipal role at that point. Putin explained to him that the Russian Federation had to reassert its presence in 'lands which, historically, had always belonged to Russia', such as Crimea, and reestablish its authority over Russians living beyond its borders. It was his view that the world would have to learn to view 'the Russian people as a great nation' once more.<sup>721</sup>

Ukraine's ambition to join the European Union will also have to be assessed on the basis of its ability to accept a critical analysis of its own history. It will need to understand that 'humanism is linked to the development of critical (even self-critical) rationality'<sup>722</sup> because, as Denis de Rougemont put it, European culture is naturally 'pluralist, secular, critical and personalist, and encourages invention, innovation and originality, even when it is subversive.'<sup>723</sup>

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720 Marlène Laruelle, *Russian Nationalism. Imaginaries, Doctrines, and Political Battlefields*, Routledge, 2018.

721 'Putin's post-imperial yearnings were already clear when I met him in 1994, well before the first eastward enlargement of NATO in 1999.' Timothy Garton Ash, *Homelands: A Personal History of Europe*, New York, Vintage, 2023.

722 Edgar Morin, *Culture et barbarie européennes*, Paris, éditions de l'Aube, 2012, p. 37.

723 Denis de Rougemont, « Originalité de la culture européenne comparée aux autres cultures », conference of 17 November 1959. Source: CEC archives, Geneva. CEC 119. Box II-I-45.

