Open Forum

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Russian War, Neocolonialism and Holocaust Studies in Ukraine

Abstract: This text is related to the theme of the usage of historical narratives about WWII in the current Russian War against Ukraine. It is a brief analysis of the instrumentalisation of Holocaust history in Russian propaganda, as well as the role of historians as enablers in these processes. The essay also focuses on the issue of decolonization of historical narratives in Western academia and Ukrainian discourses of WWII in the context of the Russian–Ukrainian War. The final issue discussed in this text concerns how Russian aggression in Ukraine has affected academic studies and research on the history of the Holocaust in Ukraine and EU countries.

Keywords: decolonization of the history narratives, Holocaust studies, instrumentalisation of Holocaust history, Russian war against Ukraine

Russian aggression in Ukraine has affected many aspects of our lives; it also influences academic studies and research on the history of the Holocaust. One of the main propaganda myths of this war is the absurd accusation of "Nazism" against Ukraine. This is a convenient propaganda cliché that stems from the Soviet mythologizing of "Victory" in the Second World War, picked up again by Russia.

Such propaganda practices, in turn, generate a mirror response from Ukrainians accusing Russia of fascism/Nazism. The Holocaust comes up quite often in this discourse. Its recognizable symbols and concepts such as "Babyn Yar" or "Auschwitz" are used to define the crimes of the aggressor state against the Ukrainian population. In addition, the legacy of the Holocaust still remains insufficiently understood and accepted among the Ukrainian public. Perhaps this is partly the reason for such comparisons. For example, today, as victims of aggression, we receive comprehensive economic and military support from most Western countries. Refugees from

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Ukraine are welcomed in many EU states. We live in our own country, and have our own army, which is conducting successful military operations against the aggressor. The Internet provides us with access to global communication networks. The majority of Holocaust victims had nothing of the kind; they could not feel the support of either state institutions or the international community. Jewish refugees were not welcomed in most countries of Europe and America. Moreover, hiding in dugouts, attics or basements for years, not only did they not have access to global communication networks or electricity supply, but neither to daylight and the basic information about what the date or time of day it was, etc.; not to mention access to the news about the course of events on the fronts. Their "heating" was often provided by the domestic animals in the barns, which became a shelter for Jewish victims during the cold winter months.

Although comparing current events to the Holocaust is not quite appropriate, the Russian war against Ukraine has generated a lot of productive academic discussion in the West. Among the latter are controversies regarding the decolonization of the Western academic narratives about Eastern Europe. Several decades have passed since Larry Wolff's work *Inventing Eastern Europe* appeared, but the Enlightenment trends described in it continue to affect. Eastern European studies are often characterized by excessive Russocentrism and remnants of colonial discourse. This is manifested both at the level of academic positions (most of which are given by scientists who study Russia) and the prevailing narratives that have done a lot to "normalize" Russia's aggressive policy.

This is especially important in the context of Holocaust studies. The legacy of Nazism had been unequivocally condemned at the level of academic research as well as in public opinion. Everything even tangentially related to it is automatically subject to condemnation and rethinking as a criminal ghost of the past. In the German discourse, even a special phrase of "Overcoming the Past" (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*) was coined for this. Partly born in post-war Germany, the "Tyranny of Guilt" travelled to other countries of the West. Finally, in the rhetoric of these countries, a real "enlightenment mission" to make a number of Eastern European nations repent was born, because of their historical narratives, which nurtured nationalists who had been partially responsible for Nazi crimes due to their sinful collaboration as heroes. As such, Eastern Europe again appeared as an "insufficiently civilized", perhaps a somewhat backward region, which needs a ray of Western culture of memory and remorse.

It seems that the Kremlin regime openly took advantage of these fierce competitions for memory. Continuing cultivation of the myth of victory over Nazism, Putin's regime appropriated it exclusively for its own country and people. Rhetoric of betrayal and co-responsibility for the crimes of Nazism were applied to the case of the Eastern European nations, and their role in the victory was diminished. Ukraine

occupied a special place here. The partial popularity of historical narratives in Ukraine about the struggle of the OUN (Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists) and the UPA (or UIA – Ukrainian Insurgent Army) and the reluctance to recognize their crimes was transformed by Russia into accusations of building a new "Nazi regime". No matter how absurd it sounds, this artificial propaganda discourse tried to resonate with Western criticism of Ukrainian nationalism. In fact, there is a whole chasm between these fictional similarities. On the one hand, it is a neo-imperial propaganda aimed at legitimizing expansionist intentions. On the other hand, it is a rhetoric that strives for emancipation from any manifestations of aggression and colonialism.

In the vicissitudes of these complex discussions, it is easy to get confused and descend to the level of a witch hunt. Partly, some Ukrainian researchers are beginning to include as "pro-Kremlin traitors" anyone whose rhetoric slightly resembles Kremlin propaganda theses. For example, criticism of ethnocentric approaches to writing the history of Ukraine, and their main advocate Volodymyr Viatrovych, as it became evident from the last article by Olga Bertelsen, can be sufficient grounds for accusation of working for the Kremlin and its intelligence services.[1] In fact, this argument can be used to "discredit" most of those Ukrainian historians who are trying to modernize Ukrainian historical narratives and fit them into the global context, and to criticize everyone who does not recognize the national paradigm of historical writing as fundamental. Russia's full-scale invasion is seen by some as a call to return to ethnocentric versions of Ukrainian history and an even greater honouring of Stepan Bandera and the OUN-UPA. All this continues to function according to a rather primitive childish conflict of "you to me – I to you". Everything that the modern Kremlin calls "black" cannot automatically be considered "white". Black and white narratives are generally far from the truth.

Holocaust studies encourage Ukrainian researchers to rethink many aspects of a difficult past. Among them is a complex palette of complicity of the local population and national organizations in the Nazi crimes. However, this rethinking must come from within Ukraine (or in close, equal cooperation with its researchers and broader circles of society) and take place in forms acceptable to it. Only then will it not resemble the civilizational messianism of the West imposed from the outside. In particular, the OUN-UPA, despite the recognition of their criminal actions, cannot be equated with Nazism or studied exclusively through the criminal practices of these organizations without considering the other side of the coin. Ukrainian integral nationalism was born as an anti-colonial movement and contained very little expansionism. In this sense, it cannot be equated with full-fledged colonial practices and needs a separate contextualization.

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1 Olga Bertelsen, "Russian Front Organizations and Western", *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence*, 0: 1–26, 2023, URL: https://doi.org/10.1080/08850607.2022.2147807.

Comprehensive research, which is not focused exclusively on the heroism or crimes of these organizations, is needed. But for this we need a victory over the eastern Kremlin version of modern imperialism. Until now, the shadow of Russian imperialism has been one of the reasons why Ukraine has been unable to start a deeper discussion about its own complicated past. Anti-colonial opposition continued, and the legacy of integral nationalism was seen by many as one of the effective mobilization tools. Obviously, the Ukrainian version of overcoming the past cannot be a copy of the German practices of repentance. After all, Ukrainians primarily were victims of totalitarian policies and only to a much lesser extent their co-creators. And this latter often became a consequence/reaction to colonial policies brought from outside. Western discussions about Nazism and their own colonial sins should probably shift to a greater focus on current threats coming from the undemocratic world. The insufficiently understood legacy of Ukrainian radical nationalism may seem like a manifestation of injustice, but its potential is not capable of posing a serious civilizational threat to modern Europe. However, this cannot be said about the Kremlin regime, which seeks not only to absorb Ukraine, but also to destroy the EU. This is what some researchers of the history of Nazism and the Holocaust have overlooked. After all, evil never returns in the same form.