Remembrance done wrong. Patriotic narratives, Left-wing history and constructed imageries of Ukrainian national remembrance policies

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"I wanted to dedicate this step to one thing – if we want understanding and national unity, we must live on the true story. Lies will not lead to partnership," **— famous quote by Ukrainian president Viktor Uschenko on the granting Stepan Bandera status of national hero.**

The same person did a lot for pursuing new policies of remembrance and of studying Ukrainian history — access to archives has never been easier, starting the process of declassification of most soviet archives and actively promoting history research. Partially it was a renaissance of Ukrainian history — free from Soviet and Russian propaganda narratives.

But at the same time new state narratives and tendencies arose with uncritical regard to history and politicization of it, especially speaking about Ukrainian nationalists and the Ukrainian left-wing, trying to bring all of the left's tradition, no matter of beliefs and views of the persons to the label of "patriots", denying speaking about actual views of the people. The narrative created can be described as ethnocentric and civilizational, with no place for complexities and controversies, and with this, with no real dealing with actual history.

These trends were reversed by the Yanukovych administration, who tried to bring again Russian propaganda and Soviet narratives in history — which were already strongly presented as a legacy of Soviet academia, but this disruption wasn't to last long — and Maidan accelerated trends in history studies of the Uschenko times.

State patriotic national-narrative

In 2006 Institute of national remembrance was created, becoming the main drive for the progress in creating new conceptions of Ukrainian history, mostly nationalist one. It popularized civilizationary and ethnocentric conception of history — where contradictions between different political forces and views of people, classes, politics, regions became secondary, and the struggle for the Ukrainian state, self-governance of nation and fight against Russian imperialism became priority. In such a way, Russia became a metaphysical being, the same as Ukraine, that is not changing and always in constant, same struggle. Not to say that the fight against Russian imperialism and conflict between nations didn't exist, or that the struggle for statehood and national-liberation wasn't real. It was, but it was waged differently depending on the period and historical context, not between metaphysical beings, but with subjects in motion, and such subjects never were unified — the struggle against Red Russian imperialism, against White, against Russian Empire and against Putinist Russian federation

are not one historical grand struggle between metaphysical Ukraine and Russia, but absolutely different parts of history.

Such approach paved the way for denigrating actual political beliefs and political, social and economic questions in Ukrainian politics, with institute of national remembrance heroizing at the same time Petlyura (social-democrat), Skoropadsky (pro-Russian and pro-German monarchist, which Petlyura fought against) and Bandera (ethnonationalist), and somehow, unifying myth forces not to say about "differences" of such radically different figures, but to say about their "common fight for Ukraine", with question arising: "Fighting for what kind of Ukraine?".

Trying to consolidate society and popularize history on the basis of "fighting for Ukraine", the new national policies concentrated on promoting Bandera and UPA as national heroes, creating hollow images of him and of UPA. For "consolidation of Ukrainian society" the most controversial people were chosen, probably partially to not to engage with the grand history of Ukrainian left fighting for independence and national-liberation, who could easily become great unifying figures, but to engage with idealized versions of right-wing movement, without engaging with any contradictions of it. And partially it was a choice done a long time ago by Soviet history policies, which called every oppositional Ukrainian as Banderovtsy or Petlyurovtsy

In the end, history was given a role of propaganda weapon, albeit a defencive one, against a more stronger propaganda machine from Russia — which actively tried to deny Ukrainian identity and its history. The Maidan revolution and Russian occupation of Donbass and Crimea very clearly created lines between "Us" and "Them", which became a general trend in historical remembrance too.

Holodomor: capitalizing on tragedy, or the question: how much?

Yuschenko once shooked historical community in Ukraine, saying that from the Soviet crimes of Holodomor 10 million people died. Probably, it's the highest assessment from an official of such level. With that said, the topic of Holodomor actively became a political issue, as a part of ideological battle for Ukrainian legacy. In the situation, when in the Soviet Union such a genocidal act was silenced, one can understand the desire to attract attention to this crime and to defend remembrance of it. But, as Gennadyi Efimenko, Ukrainian historian, wrote in his article, "More is not better, its worse":

"For some time, two types of evaluations coexisted in Ukrainian society – professional (scientific) and, let's call them, emotional, and this did not cause intractable misunderstandings. And later, despite the legal recognition of the Holodomor by Ukraine and a number of other countries as genocide, that is, after the Holodomor became known in the world, and even despite the emphasis on the fact that the nature of the crime is not determined by the number of casualties, a number of persons in a rather aggressive form (up to calls to the repression of those who argue for a lower number) the idea that a true patriot cannot name the number of losses less than 7 million losses began to impose itself on society. As a result of this imposition, the number of losses from hunger during the Holodomor, recognized by one or another researcher, often began to be directly dependent on the definition of Genocide: if you do not support the exaggerated number of victims, then you do not recognize the Holodomor as genocide."

Unfortunately, such politicization led the way to falsification in academia, and opened the doors for people, who made their careers on lies. Comparison of Holodomor and Holocaust and always rising death toll become a part of constructed imagery of national narrative, creating the myth on the place of real tragedy and a real crime, commited by the bolsheviks. Using "ideologically useful fake" creates disrespectful farce in discussions, where it shouldn't be by any definition.

Blended and constructed imagery of national heroes

Constructing new myths and imagery , "ideologically useful fakes" unfortunately, were growing as a general tendency. Most myths were created around the issue of OUN (Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists) and UPA (Ukrainian Insurgent Army).

With very strong Ukrainian-jewish identity and proudness of common history, the question of Ukrainians participating in Holocaust and ethnic cleansing against jewish populationh in times of civil war (most notably, Otaman Zelenyi) and Second World War became taboo, number of uncritical publications were made, from such authors as Vyatrovych, Koval and others. Topic of UPA and its participating in holocaust and pogroms in civil war became politicized, and speaking about such problems could be seen as being "unpatriotic".

Trying to create image of patriotic heroes from UPA, the question of their ideology and participating in the holocaust was denigrated or denied at all. They were "great fighters for the future of Ukraine"

In the same general trend, differences between UPA groups and political tendencies are non-existent in such narrative, as well as all of their crimes. Hollow personalities were created, and myths constructed.

UPA presented as a unified force, who fought for an independent Ukraine. All of the "contradicted" parts of its history are washed away, and the institute of national remembrance is not interested in engaging with the beliefs of the people and with heterogeneity of such movements.

Decommunization done wrong

Soviet occupation of Ukraine and imperial past, its cultural assimilationist policies created a very strong need of reflexing of its legacy, to create a strong, anti-colonial and anti-imperialist vision, which only could create a space to national-liberation.

In such, decommunization was a logical and a progressive step to deal with colonial past.

But with incompetence and political prejuce decommunization partially lost its anti-colonial and reflexive potential. Working with traumas of occupation, assimilation and genocide and creating new and fair post-colonial narratives — the objectives to have a decommunization in Ukraine in the first place, weren't pursued. Instead, decommunization was used as a political tool and one of not reflexing, but destroying history.

Decommunization was a reaction to colonial past and to actions of the modern Communist party of Ukraine, which practically was "a fifth column" of Russian imperialism. Neoliberal governments used it as a tool to promote simplified, and sometimes falsified narratives, which practically created a possibility for some people to deny the oppressive nature of the Soviet regime, engaging with mythologies of Ukrainian government, and not real history. Such mythology was used to promote neoliberal vision of Ukraine and attack socialist-leaning people as a traitors and anti-Ukrainian minded people

Although, some of Ukrainian communists were removed from decommunization lists (for example, Skrypnyk), but not all of them, and there on these decommunization lists, people who weren't participating in criminal actions of Lenin and Stalin government, or even tried to pursue pro-Ukrainian policies, still were included. Such figures, as Karl Marx, who was very critical of Russian imperialism, were decommunised too.

Moreover, the government used decommunisation as a pretext and justification to reform labour

codex and leftovers of social state in Ukraine, stating that it is a part of "Soviet imperial legacy". Using the same methods, public spaces created during soviet time were "decommunized" as well, to build elite commercianalized housing projects, new Trade malls and shopping centers.

Ukrainian left in historical remembrance

In the political field, decommunization was an attack against everyone on the left. And to prepare such, Soviet and nationalist narratives were very helpful.

Ukrainian history is mostly the history of left-wing resistance. Most of our famous poets, writers and politicians were socialists. To name a few names: Ivan Franko, Lesya Ukrainka, Yulian Bachynskyi, Mykhailo Drahomanov, Volodymyr Vynnychenko, Mykhailo Hrushevskyi — all were famous Ukrainian socialists. To engage in Ukrainian history without engaging with history of the Ukrainian left is impossible. First Ukrainian state — Ukrainian People's Republic was built around socialist parties USDLP and UPSR and most of the resistance against Russian imperialism was from Ukrainian socialists.

To promote their own neoliberal vision of Ukraine, they cannot just ignore such people — first prime-minister of independent Ukraine was a radical socialist, who in the end of his life was open supporter of Pannekoek council communism, and around first Ukrainian independent state a lot of today's national myths were built.

To deal with such a strong legacy of the left, and its interconnection to national-liberation struggle, the same civilizational and ethnocentric approach is used. All of the socialist figures in Ukrainian history unexpectedly become "Patriots", "Nationalists", "Statesmans" and so on. About their socialism, the government speaks as of the "false trend of the time", completely ignoring the legacy of most political movements in Ukraine till the Soviet Union and of the first Ukrainian independent state altogether.

Strong efforts were made by the Soviet government, mostly in the times of Lenin, and then continued under Stalin, to portray all Ukrainians as nationalists, and of socialist movement as so-called "petty-bourgeois". Unexpectedly, this Soviet narratives become very helpful to our "decommunizers" to wash away all the left ideas from the left. Ukrainian socialist thinker and sociologist Drahomanov become Ukrainian liberal thinker Drahomanov. Ivan Franko from socialist became nationalist, and so on.

Destroying the image of Ukrainian left, hiding or diminishing the importance of the beliefs of Ukrainian historical left, they paved the way for themselves to call everyone on the left as a propagator of foreign, anti-Ukrainian ideas. The new policies of remembrance and decommunization didn't reflex Soviet narratives, but partially adapted them, with modification, for pursuing their own causes. It goes for their dealing with nationalists and with the Ukrainian left. Usually a "post-colonial" narrative constructed by the institute of national remembrance was a Soviet narrative turned upside-down.

Such remembrance didn't unite Ukrainian society, and didn't produce real historical analysis, but created their own myths to fight Russian myths and pursue their own political goals. Some time, the process of national remembrance had a very progressive character, but caught between hammer and anvil, it usually pushed itself to the point of absurdity.

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