

## **This is not how Ukrainian History should be Debated (at Columbia or Elsewhere)**

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**The Ukrainian Weekly, 19 May 2013**

It was only after accepting an invitation to participate in the workshop "Russian and Ukrainian Nationalism: Entangled Histories" at Columbia University's Harriman Institute on April 22–23, 2013, that I realized I had walked into a minefield. I soon learned of colleagues who declined invitations, citing concerns about some of the workshop organizers and participants who support restrictions on freedom of speech and promote stereotypes of Ukrainians. The workshop's organizers were Tarik Cyril Amar, Per Anders Rudling and Andreas Umland.

The workshop opened with a useful session on modern nationalism before and during World War I. Professors Lohr (American University), Plokhii (Harvard), Bilenky (Univ. of Toronto) and Wortman (Columbia) explained how modern nationalism or nationalisms developed in the Russian Empire, including in Ukraine, and contrasted the aims, strategies and outcomes of different state actors and social strata involved in those developments. These presentations and a small number of others were the exceptions in what otherwise failed to become a scholarly forum for the study of Ukrainian and Russian nationalisms.

To begin, although the workshop was supposed to explore Russian and Ukrainian nationalisms and their interplay, there was almost nothing presented on Russian and Soviet nationalisms and no analysis of Russian national identity and its relationship to Ukraine. That is, nothing on Putinism or "Nashi" or Zhirinovskiy or neo-Stalinism. And, the majority of workshop sessions utterly failed to provide any comparative perspectives, which is both imperative when discussing nationalism in whatever forum and contrary to the workshop's purported theme. Then, many discussants were not specialists and their remarks were often weak and insufficiently analytical.

Much of the workshop was instead devoted to Ukrainian "nationalism" and "Nazi collaboration." There is, of course, nothing wrong with devoting a workshop to Ukrainian nationalism, and there is, of course, nothing wrong with criticizing Ukrainian

nationalism. But why do so under the camouflage of a workshop on Russian and Ukrainian nationalisms that has little or nothing to do with Russian nationalism? And, more importantly, why do so without providing any context for what was happening at various points in time when Ukrainian nationalists were active, what options were available to them, and what their goals were - unless the agenda is a political rather than an academic one. There obviously is much more to analyze and discuss about Ukrainian nationalism than OUN's or UPA's at different time's cooperation, collaboration and armed conflict with different factions in the Nazi Germany state apparatus than is captured by the simplistic notion of "Nazi collaboration."

The workshop was also marred by unacceptable intolerance. Volodymyr Viatrovych, former director of the Ukrainian Security Service (ex-KGB) archives, attended the first day afternoon session. The panel chair grumbled quite loudly and only then reluctantly allowed Viatrovych three minutes in the discussion, and then cut Viatrovych off as he attempted to reply to allegations raised by a session presenter. I asked Umland (Kyiv Mohyla Academy) and other organizers why Viatrovych was not simply asked to give a presentation, maybe in a separate additional panel, but I was rebuffed. So was my suggestion to bring him with us to the restaurant for dinner at the end of the first day where he could have mingled with other speakers. There appeared to be zero interest in or tolerance for a discussion.

I, for one, fail to understand why there was so much intolerance towards Viatrovych. But intolerance in the form of marked tendentiousness was exhibited in other ways as well. For example, certain speakers who appeared to have pre-planned goals of portraying Western Ukrainians as Nazi collaborators and anti-Semites arranged facts to fit their conclusions.

Pers Anders Rudling gave a paper on Mykola Lebed that purported to cover his entire political life with the single goal of portraying him as a war criminal. "He never faced justice or accountability for his wartime activities," Rudling lamented. Putting aside the fact that it is not the task of academics to serve as courts of law, the obsession with Lebed's alleged war criminality ignores, to cite one example, his leadership and organization of the Prolog Research and Publishing house for a quarter of a century from

1953 to 1978 during which it became the centre of Ukrainian diaspora liberal political life.

Selecting elements of Lebed's biography from the 1930s, certain allegations about his wartime activities and then the Village Voice's attempt to "expose" him in the mid-1980s while ignoring everything else can hardly be construed as objective scholarship. This would be the same as focusing only on Menachem Begin's and Nelson Mandela's respective leadership of the Irgun and Umkhonto we Sizwe terrorist groups while ignoring their subsequent political biographies in Israel and South Africa respectively. There are countless terrorists who become politicians and state leaders from, for example, Ulster, South Africa and Israel. Charles de Gaulle served as Prime Minister and President during five of the nine years (1958-1962) of the Algerian war of independence (1954-1962) during which 1.5 million died from conflict, executions and torture. But, a biography of de Gaulle that only focused on his responsibility as head of state during the commission of French war crimes in Algeria would not be a valid representation of his political life.

For some reason, younger revisionist Western historians of Ukraine seem to be unwilling to bring in comparative studies into their analysis of Ukrainian history. Is this because that would get in their way of sensationalizing Ukrainian nationalist war crimes?

Another workshop presenter, Anton Shekhovtsov (Vienna Institute for Human Sciences) — who although from Sevastopol, which has the greatest number of xenophobes and extremists in Ukraine — focused his entire talk instead on Western Ukraine and "Svoboda." He refuses to accept the existence of xenophobia, racism and anti-Semitism anywhere in Ukraine, except that which may be found in Western Ukraine. Because he had not read my paper prior to the workshop, I had to repeat what was there, namely: the US State Department, Council of Europe, US diplomatic cables (Wikileaks) and the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) have reported the highest levels of xenophobia in Ukraine are to be found in Crimea, and that the greatest number of skinheads is found in Eastern Ukraine (usually with ties to Russia).

The workshop also exposed how imperative it seemed to be for those who want to focus exclusively on Western Ukraine and Ukrainian nationalists to try and tie them to examples of anti-Semitism, especially under "nationalist" President Viktor Yushchenko.

Rudling had already back in 2006 published a study of anti-Semitism in Ukraine in "Canadian Slavonic Papers." He argued there that there had been a "substantial growth in organized anti-Semitism" in Ukraine since the Orange Revolution. I doubt that my workshop paper changed these people's minds. But I quoted US cables from Kyiv that describe how the first serious attempt to combat xenophobia, racism and anti-Semitism took place under President Viktor Yushchenko and that these government policies ended in 2010 when Viktor Yanukovich was elected President.

Another inconvenient fact is that the 2012 US State Department report on human rights in Ukraine cited the Association of Jewish Communities and Organizations of Ukraine (VAAD) long-term data showing "a trend of improvement" in the level of anti-Semitism. VAAD stated that "over the last four to five years, there has been a continuous decline in the number of anti-Semitic publications in the press; in the number of acts of vandalism of cemeteries, memorials, and synagogues; and the number of assaults on the street of Jewish people," as well as declining negative attitudes toward Jewish persons in public opinion polls.

The rise of Svoboda during a period of declining anti-Semitism suggests that this was not an issue that the nationalist party used to attract votes, as believed by some at the workshop.

Holocaust denial is repugnant, but so too is denial of genocide committed against the Crimean Tatars, half of whom died during their deportation to Central Asia in 1944. There are three political forces that downplay, justify or deny that crime against the Crimean Tatars – the Party of Regions, Communists and Crimean Russian nationalists. Holocaust denial is on the far fringes of Ukrainian nationalist politics and most Ukrainian politicians would agree that the Holodomor killed both Ukrainians and other nationalities. In contrast, the Communist Party and some Party of Regions deputies refused to stand to commemorate the Holodomor's victims last November in parliament. Could one even imagine the reaction in the Israeli Knesset if a political party refused to stand up to commemorate victims of the Holocaust?

More bizarre was Shekhovtsov's attempt to downplay the murder of two Ukrainian nationalists in Ukraine when I discussed the absence of any murders of Russian nationalist counterparts in Ukraine. Shekhovtsov came as close as I have ever heard

anyone say that the murder in Odessa was undertaken by an "anti-fascist" defending himself against a "fascist" Maksym Chayka (in other words, that it was justified). Shekhovtsov ignored the fact that the murderer was a member of the national Bolshevik Rodina Party which has ties to local organized crime and was funded by Russian intelligence services (two Russian diplomats were expelled from Ukraine in summer 2009 for providing covert support to extremist and separatist groups in Odessa and Crimea). I have attended many academic forums over the last two decades, but this is the first occasion on which I have ever heard a murder being justified because it was committed by a good "anti-fascist" against a bad "fascist." Such claims sound very intolerant and, of course, quite Soviet.

So, ironically, Svoboda and other nationalist group are followed in minute detail, and there are already more Western academic articles on Svoboda and Western Ukrainian nationalism than the only two Western scholarly articles published in "Canadian Slavonic Papers" and "Demokratiatsiya" about the Party of Regions.

In 2002, Donetsk Governor Yanukovich wrote a preface to a history of the security services in his oblast where he praised the Cheka and NKVD – but this has failed to illicit any critical response. If Svoboda leader Oleh Tyahnybok would have in the same manner praised the Gestapo this would have no doubt led to numerous journalist and academic articles, open letters and petitions. Why the double standard when the Cheka and NKVD were the Soviet equivalent of the Gestapo in terms of organizations that committed mass crimes against humanity.

Umland is fascinated by Russian nationalism in Russia, which he follows in minute detail, but for some reason he doesn't find the topic of Russian nationalism *in Ukraine* of interest, instead saving his energy exclusively for Western Ukraine and for ethnic Ukrainian nationalism. Similarly, Shekhovtsov is uninterested in doing research in his home region of Crimea, about which he said, "I have not seen anti-Tatar graffiti." Such violent conflicts as those that take place in the Crimea between Russians and Tatars (see a recent violent conflict at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kfLkND6XkT8>) do not take place in other regions of Ukraine – except when, as in May 2011, Russian nationalists travelled to Lviv and during the ensuing fracas shot a Svoboda supporter.

Why have we arrived at this seeming impasse in intellectual debate on Ukrainian history? One reason is the acute level of provincialism in Ukrainian academia where most scholars from Ukraine do not know English, do not publish in the West or read Western publications. Only five Ukrainians are members of Ponars ([www.ponarseurasia.org/](http://www.ponarseurasia.org/)), the network of post-Soviet scholars, and in the third decade of Ukrainian independence there is still little integration or cooperation between Ukrainian and Western academia.

Another problem is the lack of true debate (not polemics) between various academic groups, including what I call the Revolutionary Revisionists (i.e., newcomers into Ukrainian studies) and Democratic Centrists (often the old guard). These two groups discussed historical and political questions during the normal intellectual environment which existed for most of the 1970s and 1980s and the first two decades of Ukrainian independence. The Ukrainian-Canadian Socialist political group (Dialoh) to which controversial workshop participant John-Paul Himka (University of Alberta) belonged cooperated with Lebed's Prolog and Ukrainian-American liberals but now he is the de facto leader of the Revolutionary Revisionists.

Reviving contacts and holding debates between the Revolutionary Revisionists and Democratic Centrists will be difficult but should be attempted. Dominique Arel (University of Ottawa) gave a balanced paper at the Columbia workshop and perhaps could use his annual conference on Ukraine as a venue. Political scientists, such as Arel, should take the lead because they integrate Ukraine within comparative frameworks and understand how history is used and abused in contemporary Ukraine.

In the light of the above, one has to conclude that the Workshop failed in its objective of becoming a scholarly discussion of Ukrainian and Russian nationalisms – and especially in discussing the wide range of nationalisms in Ukraine (this author was the only one to discuss the most violent and neo-Soviet political force in Ukraine – the Party of Regions). Further, it remains unclear if there currently can be dialogue between the Ukrainian studies establishment in North America and revisionist historians - even though the field urgently needs this step to be taken.