

De-sovietizing Ukraine

Taras Kuzio on Ukraine's 'de-sovietization' laws and Russia's demonization of Ukrainian patriotism

Ukraine's parliament has recently passed anti-totalitarianism laws which equate Soviet Communism with Nazism. To many Ukrainians with Soviet sympathies, these direct comparisons between Nazi and communist regimes are sacrilegious. Are such moves wise in the current conflict environment?

Ukrainians holding a Soviet identity are primarily found in the Crimea and the Donbas, with some also in the swing regions of Kharkiv and Odesa. It is not therefore a widespread phenomenon and has been in decline since 2014. I do not think equating Soviet and Nazi crimes will be problematic as the majority of Ukrainians, including in the East and South, have negative views of Stalin and believe the Holodomor was genocide. Destalinisation has been taking place in Ukraine since the late 1980s and there have been profound changes in identities - the opposite to Russia, which has seen re-Stalinisation since 2000. The concept of 'The Great Patriotic War' was only used by one of four post-independence Ukrainian presidents (Yanukovych) while the others, especially Kuchma, were inclusive in their approach and talked of the entire war period from 1939-1945.

Is it academically appropriate to place all of Ukraine's 20th century independence fighters in one category, as the new law recently adopted by the Ukrainian parliament attempts to do?

I do not think that politicians should become involved in historical disputes. This should be left to the media, academics, and civil society. Ukrainian history should be written in an inclusive way, as it was under President Kuchma. History textbooks then discussed everybody who fought for 'Ukraine'. For example, in World War II this meant Soviet Ukrainian soldiers (but not the NKVD), UPA, and Ukrainians in the Polish, Canadian and US armies.

The ties between WWII Ukrainian insurgent groups and the Nazi regime remain a source of international controversy, making Ukrainian steps towards rehabilitation particularly problematic. Should Ukrainians be trying to encourage international audiences to explore the nuances of the choices facing Ukrainian patriots during WWII, or would such efforts merely fuel further claims of 'fascist' revisionism?

I reiterate that history, especially contentious history, should be not taken up by politicians but by academics, journalists and civil society activists. We know that it takes decades for countries to come to terms with past deeds - it took the French 3-4 decades to begin to discuss the Algerian War of Independence in which 1.5 million died and French forces widely practiced torture. Ukrainian academics are making progress in being more open and honest in discussing OUN's ideological closeness to Italian fascism in the 1930s, but there is a long way to go. There are various inter-related problems holding up this evolution: the Ukrainian diaspora (including emigre OUN Bandera and Melnyk groups) have not invested in research and have therefore left the field open to revisionists whose views are close to Russia's. Only one diaspora academic, Alexander Motyl, currently writes balanced studies on the subject. OUN itself cannot be under-

stood one-dimensionally as its ideology evolved into democracy and social democracy at the 1943 Congress in Ukraine, while most rank and file UPA soldiers were simply patriots, not 'fascists'. Ukrainian nationalism has been denounced and attacked by Russia for centuries, ever since the 1709 Battle of Poltava (negatively immortalised in a poem by Alexander Pushkin). From 1945-1990 the Soviet regime attacked Ukrainian nationalism as 'Nazi', 'fascist', and in the pay of the CIA, MI6 and Mossad. This non-scientific definition of 'fascism' is used today by Vladimir Putin and Donbas separatists (who themselves rely on real Nazi volunteers from Russia). Russian notions of Ukrainian 'fascism' are applied to any Ukrainian patriot, whether communist, social democrat, liberal, nationalist or politically moderate supporter of the Orange Revolution and Euromaidan. In Moscow's eyes, there are only good Little Russians and bad Ukrainian 'fascists' in Ukraine.

This year Ukrainians will hold a day of remembrance and reconciliation on the eve of the traditional Victory Day celebrations. How can the rival historical visions of WWII which persist in today's Ukraine be reconciled in a way which protects the country's fragile but growing sense of national unity?

By using Kuchma's inclusive approach to World War II, which is also the approach adopted by University of Toronto Chair of Ukrainian Studies Paul Robert Magocsi. That is, honour all sides who fought for Ukraine - Soviet Ukrainian, UPA and Ukrainians in the allied forces. My mother is from near Monte Casino in Italy and the graveyard there includes very many Ukrainians who fought in the Polish allied ranks.

Under Vladimir Putin, the Soviet role in the defeat of Nazi Germany has become the chief symbol of Russian greatness and the perfect antidote to revulsion at the crimes of the Stalin regime. Do international audiences appreciate the continued potency of WWII to modern Russians?

No they do not. Putin has successfully conditioned the Russian people into forgetting Stalin's crimes, which 50% now believe were 'justified' in the name of economic modernisation and victory in World War II. Downplaying Stalin's crimes and focusing on 'The Great Patriotic War' is purposefully undertaken to permit the rehabilitation of Stalin and to deepen Russian ignorance over Stalin's collaboration with Hitler.

Most world leaders are boycotting Putin's Victory Day parade in Moscow this year in protest over Russia's military intervention in Ukraine. Some diplomats have even suggested that Kyiv would be a more appropriate place to mark the end of WWII, given Ukraine's role as chief victim of both Hitler and Stalin. Should Ukraine seek to raise awareness of its status as the epicenter of 20th century European totalitarianism, or would Ukrainian society be better served by focusing on the future?

Soviet Russia was barely occupied by the Nazis and Timothy Snyder in his book 'Bloodlands' demonstrates that the biggest crimes and bloodshed occurred in Belarus, Ukraine and Poland - not in Russia. Ukraine should therefore argue that Kyiv (or even Warsaw) would be far more appropriate venues for WWII commemorative events.



Dr. Taras Kuzio is Senior Research Associate at the Canadian Institute for Ukrainian Studies (University of Alberta), Senior Research Fellow at the Chair of Ukrainian Studies (University of Toronto), and Non-Resident Fellow at the Center for Transatlantic Relations (Johns Hopkins University-SAIS).