A Model of Historical Memory of World War II for Ukraine

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In recent times the concept of “historical memory” has become somewhat devalued through overuse. Such memory, like the past itself, does not exist: it is always a particular construction resulting from human intellectual activity. There is a countless variety of memories in society, and memory is plural by its very nature. Its various manifestations conflict with one another; elites and particular social groups contend for memory, that is, for influence on society, given that the formation of memory constitutes the formation of identity.

Of the various existing definitions of the concept of “historical memory,” I would like to propose the one given by Maria Feretti: historical memory is the complex of imagination about the past that becomes dominant in a given society at a particular historical moment and creates something in the nature of a “common sense” accepted and shared by the majority, around which a certain consensus develops. Memory is one of the sources of national identity, that is, the sense of belonging to a particular society that, thanks to these commonplaces and common myths, recognizes itself in a shared past, and thus in the present.

Wars have a particular place in human memory, and the creators of national and ideological myths invariably make use of defeats and victories alike, and even of traumatic and genocidal occurrences.

We live in a world largely shaped by the consequences of the Second World War. These include Yalta (as a particular world order), Nuremberg (as a legal precedent for the punishment of war criminals), and the Cold War (as a political and ideological conflict between East and West).
West, communism and democracy). Practically every state that participated in the Second World War has its own model of memory for that war. This memory is often divided and contested.

If we ask how the war influenced Ukraine, and whether it was a fundamentally new experience for Ukrainians, the answer can only be that the influence was tremendous and extremely significant. Ukraine considerably extended its borders, increased its territory and population, and became a founding member of the United Nations Organization. At the same time, together with Poland and Belarus, Ukraine shares a sad primacy in population loss. Irrevocable losses claimed every sixth inhabitant of the country. There is no family that did not suffer in one way or another during the war. Thus, every family has its own experience and memory of the war: Soviet and German (Romanian) occupation, collaboration and resistance to totalitarian regimes, evacuation behind the Soviet lines and forced labor in Germany, service in the Wehrmacht or in the Red Army, struggle in the ranks of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), emigration, deportation, Stalinist and Hitlerite concentration camps, and much else.

Political processes also left their mark on the experience of war. Against the background of a broad spectrum of alternative political models proposed to Ukrainians at the time, differences of world view deepened between supporters and opponents of the communist regime, sympathizers of the “Soviet project” or of an independent Ukrainian state. The writer Vasyl Barka noted that “Hitler discredited the idea of liberation from Bolshevism.” But victory in the war strengthened Stalinism in Ukraine. It seemed all-powerful, omnipresent, and invincible, with no conceivable alternative.

Ukraine became more ethnically homogeneous. The landscape of memory narrowed: Jews, Poles, Germans, Crimean Tatars and their tragedies disappeared from it. Hundreds of thousands of Russians migrated to Ukraine after the war, bringing with them a model of war memory quite different from that of Ukraine. The influence of the war on identity can be characterized as ambivalent: it accelerated Russification while simultaneously helping to strengthen Ukrainian national consciousness.

On the general canvas of war memory, Ukraine played many roles, some of them diametrically opposed: it was the victim of both Stalinist and Hitlerite occupation; a land of resistance to two totalitarian regimes; both a collaborationist and a victor that cofounded the UN; as well as a country that lost a second battle for independence and national statehood.

Such a plethora of roles currently makes Ukraine a microcosm for the interaction of collective memories of the war and its legacy, as well as a strategic arena of identity conflict. In this plethora, one can distinguish (with certain modifications) two basic contending models of historical memory—Ukrainian sovereigntist and Soviet. (This represents a “contest between victors,” so two speak, for both communists and nationalists consider themselves victors—the former over Hitler, the latter in historical perspective.)

Generally speaking, it is countries vanquished in wars that occupy themselves with identity correction—something went wrong and needs to be set right. The Soviet Union, however, was the only country among the victors that aspired to make use of the war to remake its identity. The revolutionary myth of the Great October Socialist Revolution was replaced by the myth of the Great Fatherland War (GFW), with a generous admixture of Russian patriotism/nationalism. The values formed by this myth were by no means democratic. The principles of liberty were
replaced by the heroism and sacrifice of the Soviet people. Even the terrible human losses, for which the Soviet military and political leadership itself was by no means the least to blame, were at first hushed up and then became an object of particular pride—we suffered the world’s greatest losses. There were panegyrics to the rebirth of the power and grandeur of the Soviet Union and the infallibility of Stalin himself. The memory of the war did not become the bearer of democratic antifascist values, as in the West, but of traditional nationalist values embellished with socialist rhetoric. It was the paradox of victory that Stalin exploited it in order to strengthen his regime, while the triumphant struggle of the Soviet people against the fascists led, ironically enough, to even greater suppression of freedom in the USSR. The Russian writer Vasilii Grossman justly termed the great victory “Stalin’s victory over his own people.” Soviet memory of the war became inextricably associated with Stalinism ever after, and the link between freedom and oppression became just as inextricable.

What is notable about the myth of the GFW is that it was formed from above at the initiative of the authorities who were returning to power and exploited the myth to legitimize that return. The first priority in the creation of the Soviet myth was to cover up negative memories of the war—disloyalty to the Soviet authorities in 1941, mass surrender, desertion, collaboration with the Germans during the years of occupation, the struggle of the [Ukrainian Insurgent Army] UPA, and the like—that had accumulated over the years of warfare.

It is no accident that the authorities began their purposeful campaign of commemoration and memorialization of the war precisely in Ukraine, where the level of disloyalty was perhaps the highest. Orders and resolutions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (Bolshevik) of Ukraine (CC CP(B)U) established where, how many, and what kind of monuments to erect, which memorial days to commemorate, which heroes to honor, and which enemies to denounce. The apotheosis of the creation of the Soviet myth coincided with the period of high stagnation, which saw the triumph of a completely deformed model of memory created by party ideologues and their acolytes in the arts and sciences. In its final form, the myth of the GFW was a mixture of half-truths, lies, and gaping blank spots. It is this very legacy that is invoked by present-day sympathizers of the Soviet model of memory.

It would be hard to overlook the role of the diaspora in the creation of alternatives to the Soviet models. On the one hand, anticommunist visions of the war reflected a bipolar world and were an integral part of superpower rivalry. But the anticommunism and anti-Stalinism of the Ukrainian diaspora model of memory was not so much a product of political conjuncture. It was shaped from below by individual and group models of memory preserved among those who had fought against Stalinism during the war and did not accept its ideological myths. The Kyivan Fedir Pigido-Pravoberezhny, who wrote one of the best Ukrainian memoirs, *Velyka vitchezniana viina* (The Great Patriotic War), brought the very name of the war into question. Vasyl Barka, a former Red Army soldier, wrote in his novel *Rai* (Paradise) about the equal criminality of the Stalinist and Hitlerite regimes with regard to Ukrainians. Dokiia Humenna was the first Ukrainian writer to describe Kyiv during the occupation and the tragedy of Babyn Yar, while the Volhynian writer Ulas Samchuk was the first to describe the struggle of the UPA. Ukrainian writers in the diaspora recreated a Ukrainian memory of the war that was completely at odds with Soviet memory. “Perhaps the war will strike like steel or flint until the sparks fly and burn
the eyes of those who gaze indifferently at the struggle; they will fall into every corner, forcing people to choose: which side are you on? Which does your soul serve, heaven or hell? And here’s the rub: it is hard to choose, for the two boots, those of Moscow and Berlin, make a pair. Any Ukrainian who fights the red death will be right; one who fights the black death will also be right, as will the one who fights both. Only the one who proclaims ‘I am not involved’ as the summit of earthly wisdom will be wrong” (Barka, Rai).

Despite the presence of elements of ethnophobia and anticommunism in the postwar diaspora milieu, this was a memory that underwent continual change and transformation, unlike the petrified Soviet myth. It was influenced not only by Ukrainian nationalism but also by Western liberal democracy. It was the works of historians from the diaspora—Bohdan Krawchenko, Orest Subtelny, Paul R. Magocsi, and others—that became the quintessence of models of this memory. It was these works that set the tone for Ukrainian research, especially on the Second World War. From the previous model of sacrificial Ukrainian struggle on two fronts against totalitarian empires, which was devoid of any self-critical or negative narrative about oneself, it evolved in the direction of a democratic, sovereigntist, and simultaneously multicultural and polyethnic model.

Ukrainian memory was greatly activized at the moment when the Ukrainian state came into being. It was, indeed, historical memory itself that emerged as a powerful weapon in the struggle for independence. As soon as the influence of communist rule weakened during the period of perestroika and glasnost, alternative models made themselves apparent. The struggle between the old Soviet or post-Soviet models and various national ones, both democratic and undemocratic, has been going on ever since.

The formation of the politics of memory in independent Ukraine has proceeded in stages that are clearly associated with the specifics of presidential rule.

President Leonid Kravchuk, who formerly headed the department of ideology of the CC CP(B)U, made no small personal contribution to covering up the Holodomor and discrediting the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and the UPA. His tactic was the original one of “running between the raindrops” so as to avoid getting wet—that is, keeping his distance from the extremes of communism and nationalism, as well as seeking to avoid painful subjects that might upset the northern neighbor, the communist parliament, or the divided society. Both the semicentenary of the UPA and the sixtieth anniversary of the Great Famine were practically ignored by the president and parliament. True, at the level of school textbooks the old model of the war underwent cardinal change, owing particularly to the introduction of the UPA into the discourse and to the condemnation of Stalinism and Hitlerism.

Just like Kravchuk, President Leonid Kuchma said a great deal about the importance of restoring historical memory, returning to the sources of national identity, reviving national traditions, and the like, but kept for the most part to Soviet commemorative space. What Kuchma called political wisdom was in fact an expression of cynicism and lack of principle.

Instead of institutionalizing traditional Ukrainian holidays and traditions at the national level, the authorities tried to adjust Soviet holidays to Ukrainian ones. Kuchma restored “to the letter,”
as he liked to say, the commemoration of 23 February (the Day of the Protector of the Fatherland), 8 March, 9 May, and 7 November.

In 2003 he revived the tradition of May Day greetings and introduced a new holiday—the Day of Partisan Glory—on 22 September (it preceded the day of the formation of the UPA, 14 October). In 2004 the president introduced Veterans’ Day on 1 October (on the UN calendar, this is the International Day of the Elderly—those over 65 years of age).

The myth of the war was Ukrainized by heroizing Ukrainian triumphs and sacrifices, but the OUN-UPA was passed over in silence. Not only was the cult of victory not abolished, but it obtained legitimizing support when, at the initiative of the communists, a law on the GFW was adopted (it was intended to prosecute those who “distorted the truth of the war”).

In 2004, society showed itself prepared to mobilize on the basis of regional, national, and sociocultural identities. The slogan of the Orange Revolution and Independence Square, where, in the words of Zbigniew Brzezinski, “nationalism embraced democracy,” was “to give Ukraine its first Ukrainian president.” Evident in this formulation was an appeal to revive Ukrainian historical memory.

Under President Yushchenko, the politics of memory has not only been considerably activizied but has taken on features of a systemic nature. The frequency of the president’s historical references is greater than that of his predecessors, and his repertoire of events, facts, and personalities is broader. He has stressed more than once that “For the first time we have taken a systematic approach to the national revival; we are speaking of the renewal of our historical memory…. In a united state, in independent Ukraine we must remember everyone who brought our independence closer at various times…. The Ukrainian state arises against the background of this history....”

An emphasis on the activity of the national-liberation movement became the defining feature of the new model of historical memory, with the OUN and UPA as one of its most characteristic representatives. Yushchenko was the first to greet the country with the sixty-third anniversary of the UPA. In this context, the logic of establishing the Museum of the Soviet Occupation in Kyiv and of creating the Museum of the Liberation Struggle in Lviv becomes apparent. This list can be continued with such events as the Ukrainian parliament’s acknowledgment of the Holodomor as genocide of the Ukrainian people; the mounting of an exhibition devoted to the UPA, “The Army of the Unvanquished,” by the Archives of the Security Service of Ukraine, and so on.

Overall, the Stalinist USSR appears in President Yushchenko’s model of memory as a totalitarian empire that did considerable damage to Ukraine. Not long ago he also acknowledged the colonial status of Ukraine in that empire, characterizing it as a post-totalitarian, post-colonial, and post-genocidal country. This year Yushchenko has greeted the nation with the sixty-seventh anniversary of the UPA. He has visited the monument to the Kolky Republic in Volhynia, which was created under the aegis of the UPA on German-occupied territory (the so-called region of liberty). He has also visited the Demianiv Laz memorial museum to the victims of Stalinist persecution, commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the reburial of their remains. He has issued a decree conferring official memorial status on the Łacki Street Prison in Lviv.

Against this background, the subject of the GFW becomes quite controversial. On the one hand, the ruling authorities regard the war in light of the heroic liberation struggle of the UPA, as
well as through the prism of the crimes of both totalitarian regimes. Auschwitz and the GULAG, the Holocaust and the Holodomor are boldly compared.

A new feature should be noted—the introduction of the Holocaust into the discourse of the war with regard to the Victory Day celebrations of 9 May. Earlier it was mentioned only at ceremonies in Babyn Yar. Moreover, in frequency of historical messages in the president’s appeals of 2006, the Holocaust took fourth place, preceded by the Second World War, the Holodomor, and Stalinist persecutions and deportations. (True, the Holocaust is never mentioned in the context of Ukrainian participation in it.) The president also makes mention of the deportation of the Crimean Tatars. Polish-Ukrainian encounters at the highest level are intended to discuss the complex problems of the Volhynian tragedy. Thus the model of historical memory promoted by Yushchenko cannot be called nationalist. This is a model of an inclusive political nation that is taking shape on the basis of multiculturalism and mutual tolerance. Accordingly, the national narrative is based on historical events meaningful to various national groups residing on Ukrainian territory.

Even so, the current Ukrainian model of memory of the Second World War remains a hybrid, since it includes elements of Soviet heroic rhetoric about the GFW that are far from a rational consideration of events. Soviet myths—the name of the GFW, the 9 May holiday, the uncritical approach to the Red Army—remain in this model as birthmarks. In his Victory Day speech of May 2005 the president called Soviet veterans “fighters for freedom and democracy” and noted that “they fought for the country clearly desired by Bohdan Khmelnytsky, Ivan Mazepa, Volodymyr the Great, and Yaroslav the Wise.”

In his policy on war memory, Yushchenko is following the well-trodden path of the Ukrainization of the GFW myth. This was particularly apparent in the posthumous award of the distinction of Hero of Ukraine to Oleksii Berest, a Ukrainian who took part, along with Meliton Kantaria and Mikhail Yegorov, in a dubious “first” raising of the victory flag above the Reichstag. (As is well known, this was a staged grouping filmed after the battle for official newsreels.) According to presidential decrees, Soviet symbols are an official component of 9 May celebrations. The St. George ribbon and Russian songs are standard accompaniments. The status of “Participant in the GFW” also remains unchanged.

It is also paradoxical that the term GFW was reinstated in school textbooks after the Orange Revolution (owing to the efforts of the Socialist minister Stanislav Nikolaienko). In articles for an encyclopedia of Ukrainian history now being prepared by the Institute of History, National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, the “Great Fatherland War” also remains a fundamental concept. By this logic, Baron Carl Mannerheim, Erich von Manstein et al. were participants in the Great Fatherland War.

Yushchenko is being criticized today from both left and right, both for radicalism and for lack thereof in forming a model of memory of the Second World War. That formation, one should add, is taking place against the background of internal and external conflicts. The former include, above all, the conflict of various Ukrainian identities that is being exploited by Ukrainian and non-Ukrainian political forces alike. (An example of the antithesis of the rehabilitation of nationalist heroes is the erection of a monument to the victims of the UPA, “Shot in the Back,” in Simferopol. Luhansk, Yevpatoriia, and Kharkiv also want to erect
something similar.) Donetsk took a different tack, erecting a monument to General Nikolai Vatutin, “killed by the Banderites.”

Objectively speaking, the politics of memory being instituted by President Yushchenko is aggravating relations with Russia. An almost overt information war is now going on between the two countries with the involvement of their foreign ministries, security services, media, etc.

In actual fact, the opposition to the Ukrainian president’s politics of memory is not intellectually powerful. The communists employ nothing but the old Soviet rhetoric, as does the Party of Regions. The latter celebrate the heroic epos of the triumph of good over evil (in their scenario, Stalinism is good) and offer no critique of totalitarianism/Stalinism. “Counter-memory” in Ukraine (i.e., the “Anti-Orange” Internet sites) plays a destructive role and does not act as a Foucauldian defender of freedom but as a breeding ground for the creation of negative stereotypes and social confrontation. As for reaction to Yushchenko’s politics of memory in Ukrainian society, we have the results of recent sociological surveys. They indicate that change has occurred where purposeful work has been accomplished. By the same token, nothing has changed where nothing has been done. Thus, Yushchenko has made no effort to displace the GFW narrative, and nothing has happened in that regard. In recent years, there has been practically no change of attitude to Victory Day and the term GFW. More than half the population of Ukraine supports that term and holiday.

But there has been change with regard to the UPA. More than half of those interviewed are no longer hostile to it.

With regard to the Holocaust, there has been a growth of awareness, but it has not become part of Ukrainian memory and is unlikely to do so in the immediate future.

It is not news—and this was again confirmed by the surveys—that eastern and southern Ukraine, which is under the influence of Russian media and the Party of Regions, does not accept the new model of war memory proposed by the president.

It thus remains an open question which model of war memory Ukraine should choose. The European experience may prove useful here. Social changes under way in Europe since 1989 have been canalized in two directions. After years of communist rule, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe seek to form their memory with an emphasis on the national cultural narrative. Western Europe, on the other hand, basing itself on the legacy of the ideas of the Enlightenment and humanism, has created a new culture of memory—a “culture of contrition.” While the Holocaust and repentance have become central to the West European concept of identity, a victimizing interpretation of history in the post-communist countries of Eastern Europe tends to overshadow the centrality of the Holocaust. A scholar from Estonia, Siobhan Kattago, proposes the adoption of a conditional agreement between Western and Eastern Europe—to “agree to disagree,” that is, to retain the right to abide by one’s own opinion without imposing it on others. And this may be a way out for United Europe.

At the most general level, I see three approaches or models for the formation of a concept of war memory in Europe.

The first—let us call it Baltic (East European)—entails equal condemnation of the crimes of Hitlerite and Stalinist totalitarianism, a radical renunciation of the Soviet legacy, and civilized nationalism.
The second or liberal-democratic (German) model comes down to repentance and the denunciation of war and nationalism as such, with the Holocaust at the epicenter of the model. (The assertion that Germany lost the war but won the war for memory looks attractive but remains contentious, as it is hardly likely that this model can be imposed on Europe as a whole.)

The third or post-Soviet model is now being actively exploited by the authoritarian regimes in Russia and Belarus. It comes down to the nationalization of the GFW myth, with very little, if any, space for the acknowledgment of Stalinist crimes, and it highlights imperial values (victory fanfares, military parades, excessive heroization, panegyrics to victory and sacrifice, a cult of chieftains, great states, and the like).

Which of these models applies to Ukraine? Despite Yushchenko’s radical measures, the Ukrainian model remains somewhere between those of Russia and Eastern Europe, and very far from that of Western Europe.

The basic questions to be raised in creating a model of historical memory are these: What do we want to remember and forget; what are to be the building blocks of our memory? With what values are we to infuse the commemoration and memorialization of war? It is my firm opinion that these should not be the values of the old Soviet empire. Ukrainians are not its heirs. This (neo-Stalinist) model must be completely eliminated. For Ukraine, the creation of its own model of memory is not just a question of reviving national identity, as well as democratizing and humanizing society, but also of solving the problem of emerging from under the influence of Russia, for which the GFW is a powerful means of exerting pressure on Ukraine and keeping it within its own geopolitical space.

In my opinion, a combination of the Baltic and German models might prove most useful to Ukraine. From the first we have already borrowed condemnation of Stalinist and Hitlerite totalitarianism and the maintenance of a cultured, civilized nationalism, and now, from the West European model, Ukraine should take the concept of repentance, humanism, seeking mutual understanding between former enemies and allies, honoring all who perished, and condemning the heroization of war as such. The foundations of this new model should be the values of freedom and democracy, which have never been part of the Stalinist myth, past or present, and the value of human life, which Stalinism disregarded.

The difficulty of renouncing the GFW myth consists (aside from everything already mentioned) in the fact that Ukraine has not undergone the catharsis of decommunization. Despite the terrible crimes of Stalinism, which took millions of human lives, we have never had our own version of the Nuremberg trials, which inoculated the German nation against Nazism by condemning its crimes against peace, humanity, and the laws of war. However, as the well-known historian Norman Davies has quite justly noted, the supreme leaders of the Stalin regime could have been arraigned at the Nuremberg trials along with the Hitlerites and charged with the same crimes: against peace—complicity in starting the Second World War; crimes against humanity—large-scale deportations of peoples; war crimes—the execution of Polish prisoners of war in 1939–40; the mass rape of women by soldiers both in their own country and in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, and so on. In gravity and extent of crimes, the Stalin regime could well have given the Nazis a handicap, but that regime was never brought to trial.
Ukraine has never come to terms with its past; hence freeing itself of the communist legacy is an urgent need. A principled rejection of the Stalinist legacy and of excessive heroization does not by any means entail forgetting and ignoring the memory of those who won the victory. But all this should be balanced by sorrow for the victims of Stalinism and denunciation of the crimes committed by the Red Army itself, including its crimes in Ukraine. This is the important aspect missing from our culture of memory. The path from triumph to trauma is one that every nation must walk by itself. Demythologizing and deheroizing warfare is not a simple matter of replacing holidays, names, and the like. A fundamental rethinking of the whole war narrative is required.

The conception of equal responsibility of the two totalitarian regimes must be balanced by repentance for crimes committed by Ukrainians who fought on behalf of those regimes, as well as in the ranks of a third force, the UPA.

The West European tendency, which gained its impulse from the Germans—to proceed from covering up and distorting the truth about unpleasant pages of history to the uncovering and objective interpretation of the dark pages of the war—must become the guiding principle of Ukrainian historians. We should renounce the mistaken tendency to replace old myths with new ones. On the contrary, we should proceed from the politics of memory to history. And here it is precisely the task of historians, analyzing the interaction of history with the politics of history, to define clearly “what history becomes and what becomes history” (Richard Ned Lebow).

*Translated from the Ukrainian by Myroslav Yurkevich*

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