



POLITICS

"Ukrainian Nazis" as an invented enemy

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Georgiy Kasianov

Professor, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University,
Lublin, Poland



Georgiy Kasianov deconstructs this Russian propaganda cliché, discussing its building blocks and their historical origins, explains the role of radical nationalist parties in Ukrainian politics

One of the goals of the “special military operation” was to “denazify” Ukraine. This euphemism, together with the myth of Russia as Europe’s army-liberator in World War II – actively cultivated in Russia the last twenty years – formed the perception in which the current war in Ukraine is presented as a continuation of the struggle against Nazism, unfinished in 1945. It is worth noting that this perception originates in 2014-15 in the self-proclaimed Luhansk and Donetsk “people’s republics.” The war against “Ukrainian Nazism” started there.

In a somewhat chaotic set of propaganda cliches coloring the “Ukrainian Nazism” picture, we can identify several basic patterns. First, these Nazis are the modern followers and successors of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA). During World War II, these organizations collaborated with the German Nazis, so their contemporary followers are Nazis, too. Second, today’s modern Ukrainian nationalist organizations and parties are Nazis because they, one, support the cult of the OUN and UPA, and two, hate Russia. Third, these Nazis have taken over Ukraine, oppressed both Ukrainians and Russians living in Ukraine and hatched plans to attack Russia (including Donbas and Crimea). Fourth, these Nazis are

supported by the West, serving as its allies in the fight against Russia. The West supplies the Nazis with weapons, sets up secret laboratories in Nazi-occupied Ukraine to develop biological weapons and is ready to assist Ukraine in creating its nuclear weapons – all to weaken or destroy Russia.

There is hardly any point in refuting these propaganda clichés – to do so would require the same counter-propaganda clichés.

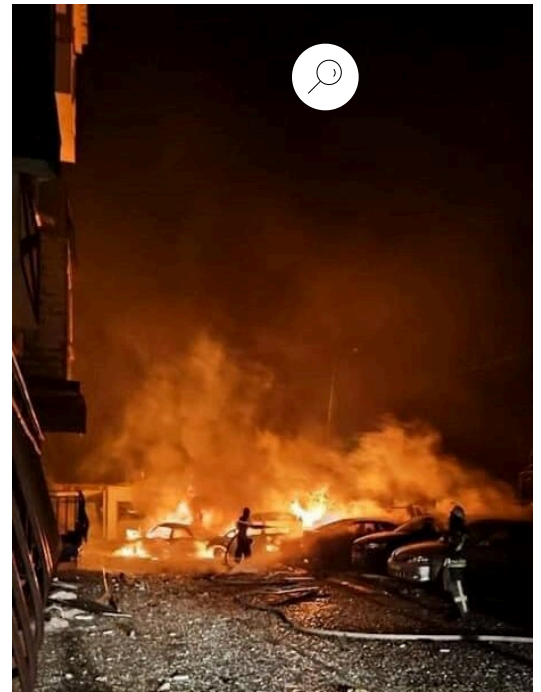
What is worth doing is deconstructing them, to consider the real phenomena based on which they were constructed.

Ukrainian nationalist organizations: the Banderites and the Melnikites

The OUN, founded in 1929, collaborated with the Nazis. Its forerunner and creator, the Ukrainian Military Organization, started cooperating with German intelligence in the early 1920s; after 1933 the cooperation continued, now with the Nazis. The primary purpose of this cooperation was initially to wreak havoc on Poland and later to fight against the USSR. Strategically, cooperation with Nazis was a part of a broader plan – permanent nationalist revolution, liberation from foreign rule and the creation of an independent Ukrainian state under the leadership of a nationalist ruler. Apart from purely pragmatic considerations, the OUN shared some programmatic aspects with Nazism and fascism: the cult of violence and action, xenophobia, political totalitarianism, corporatism, the Fuhrer principle and aggressive intolerance toward other ideologies.

In 1940-41, the OUN split into two factions: the Banderites and the Melnikites (named after their leaders Stepan Bandera and Andrei Melnik). Cooperation between Bandera members and the Nazis ended in July 1941. Germans refused to recognize the declaration of a Ukrainian state by the OUN in Lviv and arrested all who were involved in it, including Bandera. The Melnikites continued to cooperate with the Nazis until the end of occupation, mainly serving in the local occupational administration and auxiliary police units. Members of both OUN factions were subjected to repression by the Nazis. The Banderites occasionally engaged in armed confrontation with German military units behind the lines, targeting military logistics and hindering the forced transfer of the local population to Germany. They created a sizeable partisan army, the UPA, whose primary mission was to fight against the Polish underground in Western Ukraine.

"During the war, some Banderites came out with a revision of the official OUN ideology, proposing to democratize its program and rejecting the idea of



Russian bombardment on the outskirts of Kharkiv, 1 March, 2022. So Commons

building a mono-party dictatorship and a corporate state."



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After the war, this led to another split in the Bandera OUN. The "democrats" created another branch, which lost its party identity. The orthodox, led by Bandera, retained the name OUN(b) and devoted themselves to the struggle against "Moscow imperialism." The Melnikites gradually evolved toward democratic nationalism and merged with the government of the democratic Ukrainian People's Republic in exile in Poland, France, Germany and the US, created after the defeat of the Ukrainian revolution in 1917-20.

The evolution of nationalist organizations in independent Ukraine

After 1991, Melnikites moved back to Ukraine and registered themselves as a public organization engaged mainly in cultural and educational activities and popularizing history.

The Banderites, while remaining a semi-legal organization, created "facade structures" in independent Ukraine: the Congress of Ukrainian Nationalists party (KUN), the Youth Nationalist Congress (YNC) and the Center for Research of the Liberation Movement (CSLM).



UNSO volunteers in Georgia, 1992. Source: Wiki Commons

Local nationalist organizations and parties emerged in the same region and became a political force. The most prominent in political life was the Social-National Party of Ukraine (whose symbols were reminiscent of the swastika), which in 2004 changed its name to Svoboda. Svoboda is a classic right-wing, conservative party, espousing ethnic nationalism, "traditional values," anti-liberalism and xenophobia with a strong anti-Russian position.

The paramilitary nationalist formations Ukrainian National Assembly – Ukrainian National Self-Defense and Stepan Bandera Trident, meanwhile, played an active role in street politics. Their activists occasionally took part in violent confrontations with the authorities during the Leonid Kuchma era in the 2000s and in the armed conflict in Transnistria at the beginning of the 1990s and during the Chechen wars, as well as in the vandalization of Communist monuments.

"Throughout the years of independence, nationalist parties and movements failed to gain considerable representation in the legislative or executive branches."



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In parliamentary elections, they have usually joined electoral blocs with center-right and populist parties or entered parliament through the majoritarian districts of Western Ukraine. The nationalists' most significant success was the 2012 parliamentary elections, when Svoboda received more than 10% of the vote. This can be attributed to public outrage over the policies of Viktor Yanukovich, rather than some nationalist ideology among voters.

However, they were vocal on the streets and in the politics of memory. During the Maidan Revolution of 2013-14, the OUN party slogan "glory to Ukraine – glory to the heroes" was taken up and became a motto of democratic protest, its former party identity immediately losing significance. Svoboda representatives also claim authorship of the term "Revolution of Dignity." KUN posted a huge portrait of Bandera on the Maidan. Stepan Bandera Trident formed the nucleus of Right Sector, which played a prominent role in the violent attacks on the riot police and other security forces during the Maidan protests. At the beginning of the Russian aggression in spring 2014, nationalists were active in organizing voluntary battalions that fought in the East against the separatists. One of these battalions, Azov, played a prominent role in combatting separatists in Mariupol.

Nationalist organizations and politics of memory

Virtually all nationalist parties, groups, and façade organizations support the historical cult of the OUN and UPA. Their propaganda and the politics of history they have promoted at the national level in 2014-19 represented the OUN and UPA and their proxies exclusively as fighters for national liberation. However, they do this in a genuinely revisionist manner. They do their best to neglect, ignore, or in the worst case, whitewash the ugly pages of OUN and UPA history: collaboration with the Nazis, participation in the extermination of the civilian population (Poles, Jews, Ukrainians) and the totalitarian ideology of the 1930s.



UNA-UNSO members in Kyiv during the funeral of Mikhail Zhiznevsky, 2014. Source: Wiki Commons

In 2015, the CSLM, which took control of a central institute involved in the politics of memory, the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance, commissioned and lobbied for several memory laws. One of them banned symbols of the Communist and Nazi regimes. Of course, the ban on symbols of the Nazi regime was purely ornamental and reduced to the symbols of NSDAP and the Third Reich – it was meant to equate

Communism and Nazism. However, what is remarkable is that it was introduced by those whom Russian propaganda calls Nazis. Another law stipulated the glorification of those who fought for Ukrainian independence. The long list of such organizations includes the OUN and UPA, which are framed as an integral part of the broader, nationwide movement for independence. In school textbooks, the idealized image of these organizations falls within the context of the European anti-Nazi resistance. Moreover, they are mainly represented as fighters against two totalitarian systems – Nazi and Communist.

"To sum up, contemporary Ukrainian right-wing nationalists do not want to link themselves and their predecessors with Nazis. And their ideology, which features xenophobia, anti-liberalism, gender chauvinism and ethnocentrism, should not be equated to Nazism. Instead, it belongs to the (far) right wing of Ukrainian politics."



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At the same time, they do not want to come to terms with the dark past of the Ukrainian nationalist movement, including collaboration with the Nazis and war crimes. They shyly hide, ignore or whitewash these blemishes, which makes them an easy target for Russian anti-Ukrainian propaganda.

Their success in promoting an ideologically driven and distilled historical image of the OUN and UPA on the national level has created the illusion of unanimous acceptance of that historical myth. This, in turn, also provides fertile ground for representing Ukraine as a state captured by the nationalists/Nazis.

Recognition of a heroic nationalist past indeed grew in the last decade, but does it mean a triumph of the nationalist narrative?

Is nationalist ideology popular in Ukraine?

According to data from sociological polls (Rating, Democratic Initiatives, Razumkov Center), recognition of the OUN and UPA as fighters for independence has increased nationally from 27% in 2013 to 49% in 2017 (but then dropped to 46% in 2021). The share with a negative view of them decreased from 52% to 29% over the same time frame. Meanwhile, in Southern Ukraine, traditionally resistant to the glorification of the OUN and UPA, the share with a positive view increased from 6% to 30% (but dropped to 20% in 2021). The share with a negative views decreased from 73% to 46%, while that with a positive view rose from 6% to 30% (20% in 2021), in Eastern Ukraine the latter share increased from 6% to 19% and the share with a negative view fell from 55% to 52% (47% in 2021) (Data from [Rating Group](#), [Razumkov Center](#) and [Democratic](#)

Initiatives Foundation)

It should not be surprising that the growth of a number of those with a heroic image of the OUN and UPA coincided with the period of Russian aggression, the loss of territory in Crimea and Donbas, populated by opponents of the nationalist narrative of memory, and the rising popularity of heroic narratives based on the idea of the struggle for independence. At the same time, it is evident that only in Western Ukraine does the majority have such an image of the OUN and UPA, with about 80% of the population.

"Ironically, the Russian 'denazifier' are waging a devastating war and killing civilians precisely in the regions most resistant to the nationalist memory narrative the allegedly 'pro-Russian' ones"



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The apparent yet relatively modest success of nationalists in terms of memory politics was not an outcome of political competition. Representatives of the OUN(b) façade organizations YNC and CSLM took control of the central institutions responsible for memory politics due to political bargaining between democratic, populist and nationalist forces. Their rise to power was not the result of the popularity of nationalist ideology. Nationalists remained politically marginal even in wartime. During the war in 2014, they managed to win just six seats in parliament on the party list of Svoboda and four seats in majoritarian districts. The same year, two presidential candidates from nationalist parties obtained 0.7% and 1.6% of the vote. In the parliamentary elections of 2019, nationalists got one seat in a majoritarian district in Western Ukraine. The single candidate from the united nationalist block in the 2019 presidential election got 1.6% of the vote.

Nationalist ultras (like S14 and National Corps) have held noisy street actions and torchlight rallies, attacked Roma camps and LGBT, beat leftist activists and fought with police. Their efforts received undeserved and manipulatively broad coverage on Ukrainian TV and social media and were gladly advertised in Russian media as unmistakable evidence of the "Nazification" of Ukraine.

Ukrainian nationalists sought to present themselves as the true representatives of the Ukrainian people, the only force that correctly understand Ukraine's past, present and future. They claim to speak on behalf of all ethnic Ukrainians, indistinctly claiming that all Ukrainians are nationalists or should be nationalists. In their view, the cause of the problems of Ukraine and Ukrainians lay in deviation from the principles of nationalism.



Fans of FC Karpaty Lviv honoring the Waffen-SS Galizien division, 2011
Wiki Commons

Russian propaganda actively makes use of such exaggerated claims, presenting Ukraine as a sanctuary of nationalism. Like all propaganda, it is based on a selective approach to the facts, inflating some and ignoring others. The existence of right-wing nationalist organizations and parties in Ukraine, the presence of their representatives in government and regular street actions have been presented as the triumph of stone-age nationalism.

An inevitable evolution was observed: from the idea of a "fraternal Ukrainian people" to that of Ukraine captured by nationalists and finally to all Ukrainians somehow being infected with nationalism. The apotheosis was the accusation that all Ukrainians were either Nazis or Nazi collaborators, active or passive. The result of this evolution can be seen in Putin's speeches on February 21 and 24, and Russian spin-doctor Timofey Sergeitsev's article "What Should Russia Do with Ukraine?"

Taking into account other monstrous claims of the Russian leadership about "historical Russian territories" and the nonrecognition of the right of Ukraine to exist as a separate independent state, instrumentalization of the "Ukrainian Nazism" myth serves as a secondary casus belli. However, combined with the extreme militant cult surrounding the Victory of 1945, which has become a consolidating myth for Russia, "Ukrainian Nazism" looks like an increasingly dangerous fake aimed at dehumanizing Ukrainians and eliminating Ukraine.

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The end of Russia's imperial innocence

Botakoz Kassymbekova and Marlene Laruelle on how the myth of imperial

for the Kremlin. At the same time, Putin's ideas are still shared by the electorate. In this context, a successor project along the lines of "Putinism without Putin" would help to preserve stability.

state, pointing to the absence of a distinct ideology, a totalitarian party or a youth organization geared toward mobilization.

innocence has ended for good with the Ukraine war. Russia's century-old narrative of being an eternal savior, entangled with the sacred memory of World War II, will make any memory process particularly painful.

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