Memory and Military Conflict: Politics of History and its Societal Perception in Post-Euromaidan Ukraine

by Anna Chebotarova

In this article, I focus on major trends in memory politics and the regional dynamics of collective memory in post-Euromaidan Ukraine. I argue that despite the ongoing military conflict and the radicalisation of memory politics, in its memory pluralism, the Ukrainian society preserves a potential and need for a more democratic and inclusive approach towards history and an active social dialogue around the complex issues of the past.

Keywords: Collective Memory, Regionalism, Memory Politics, Ukraine, Contested Past.

As many scholars have noted, the recent events in Ukraine (the Euromaidan, the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas) have had a significant impact on the transformations of historical memory and identities in Ukraine. As Jelena Subotic argues, conflict over memory can be seen as an example of a critical situation that destabilizes both state identity and its relationships with other states. Memory, therefore, becomes one of the crucial factors of state ontological (in)security. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine has been facing multiple ontological insecurities associated with economic and political crises, debates over collective memories and belongings, as well as the dilemmas of geopolitical orientation. The Russian annexation of Crimea and the war in Eastern Ukraine has taken these insecurities to a whole new level. Such critical situations, as Subotic argues, not only create ruptures in everyday life; they also yield in the questioning of state identity and, most importantly, the rethinking of foundational state narratives on which this identity is built. Due to the conflict with Russia, changes in Ukraine’s memory politics are primarily aimed at developing a historical narrative that distances the country from its northern neighbour and mobilises Ukrainians against it. The agenda is often formulated in frames of an information war as a response to Russian propaganda. The contemporary military discourse is therefore constantly instrumentalised for the redefinition of historical narratives – and vice versa. This includes the condemnation and “externalisation” of the Soviet past, “rebranding” the World War II history (e.g., by promoting the term “Second World War” instead of the Soviet/Russian concept of the “Great Patriotic War” and emphasising Ukraine’s role and sacrifices in it) as well as an uncritical laudation of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) as freedom-fighters. The debates around these contested pages of Ukrainian history

Euxeinos, Vol. 10, No. 29 / 2020
have often become the epicentre of memory turbulence not only within Ukrainian society but also on the international level. One of the major institutional actors behind recent changes in memory politics is the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory (UINM), which was restored as a governmental body after the Euromaidan and whose role will be briefly discussed below.

In this article, I will consider the regional dynamics of the shifts in post-Euromaidan collective memory by analysing the results of the representative all-Ukrainian statistical survey “Region, nation and beyond” (from 2013, 2015 and 2017 [N=6000]). Mainly, I focus on the memory of events that have been in the spotlight of recent memory politics and are believed to polarise Ukrainian society: World War II, the activities of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), as well as the attitudes towards Soviet heritage and “decommunisation”. I argue that while the role of “mnemonic warriors” in the political field has grown during Petro Poroshenko’s presidency (2014-2019), Ukrainian society has remained heterogeneous and ambivalent in its attitudes towards the controversial past. Moreover, the intra-regional variations in the attitudes towards history are quite significant. Therefore, the existence of a clear-cut “East-West divide” or firmly defined “memory regions” in Ukraine needs to be critically reconsidered. In its memory pluralism, the Ukrainian society preserves the potential and need for a more democratic and inclusive approach towards history and reconciliation of conflicting narratives.

**Memory Politics after the Euromaidan**

The Ukrainian Institute of National Memory (UINM) is the central executive body operating under the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine. It was established on 31 May 2006 under President Viktor Yushchenko’s administration as a special organ for “the restoration and preservation of national memory of the Ukrainian people”. From 2006 till 2010 it acted as the central governmental institution with a special status, while from 2010 to 2014 (during the presidency of the fugitive Viktor Yanukovych), its role was downgraded to that of a research budget institution. Restored in its former capacity by the Cabinet of Ministers in November 2014, the Institute and its director, historian Volodymyr Viatrovych, became essential players in the field of Ukrainian memory politics. The activity of the Institute during Petro Poroshenko’s presidency (2014-2019) has received mixed evaluations – both domestically and internationally. On the one hand, the opening of former KGB archives and the legal rehabilitation of the victims of Soviet political repression, initiated by the UINM, was regarded highly by many scholars and analysts. Under Viatrovych’s direction, the UINM managed to significantly strengthen its public presence. At the same time, the Institute has often attracted negative media attention and considerable scholarly critique for its activities as a state-sanctioned regulator of history.
One of the most notorious initiatives promoted by the UINM was the package of four so-called “decommunisation laws” adopted on 9 April 2015 by the Ukrainian Parliament. The legislation introduced a “Remembrance and Reconciliation Day” on 8 May for the victims of World War II (to counterbalance the Soviet tradition of 9 May as Victory Day) and opened the access to former Soviet archives, also banning Communist and Nazi symbols. Most importantly, all the toponyms (such as geographical names, names of streets and enterprises) that are “communist in origin” were to be changed. According to public comments by the advocates of the decommunisation laws, the rejection of the Soviet past was regarded as primarily a security issue. Thus, in one of his interviews, Volodymyr Viatrovych stated that “Soviet mentality” and “the markers of Soviet identity” are the pillars of unfolding Russian aggression and therefore need to be eliminated.

One of the most controversial initiatives of the “decommunisation” legal package became the bill “On the Legal Status and Honouring the Memory of Fighters for Ukraine’s Independence in the Twentieth Century” which established a pantheon of military and political organisations including the war-time nationalistic movement (OUN and UPA). Public denial of the legitimacy of their struggle for the independence of Ukraine was proclaimed unlawful. This bill raised significant concerns both in Ukraine and abroad. The European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) has published an expert opinion, recognizing the aims of this Law as legitimate, but stating that the introduced sanctions are disproportionate. The biggest concern was that “by discouraging historical research and stifling public debate, the Law could prevent coming to terms with historical and social injustices rather than facilitate such a process”.

Because of the OUN and UPA members’ involvement in the Holocaust and the ethnic cleansing of Poles in Volhynia during WWII, the glorification of nationalist movements has also provoked harsh criticism in Poland and Israel. An open letter calling on President Poroshenko to veto these laws was signed in April 2015 by prominent Western and Ukrainian scholars and experts, who expressed criticism towards political amnesia of the role of the Ukrainian nationalist movement during WWII. In general, the ambiguity of the formulations, the attempt to impose a single version of the historical past and criminalise debates over it, as well as the methods and timing of such legislative initiatives have been critically questioned.

Consequently, the post-Euromaidan activity of UINM has largely been discussed as that of “mnemonic warriors” – a term coined by Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik to characterise memory actors who believe that they hold the one correct version of history and that alternative versions need to be delegitimised.
Societal attitudes towards the contested past

The majority of works on collective memory in Ukraine have focused on its political dimension, while the vernacular or popular collective memory remains understudied. Moreover, the sociological surveys that investigated the questions of collective memory in Ukrainian society typically present the results divided into four to six macro-regions due to the limited sample size (2000 respondents on average). While the attitudes to historical events indeed differ across Ukraine, such a sample design pre-defines the (in)famous “East-West divide” – a cliché that has often been politicised and overused in the analysis of the Ukrainian case. Not only does such an approach typically omit the peculiarities of other Ukrainian macroregions (e.g. North, South and Centre), it generalises and oversimplifies very complex issues and problems. The University of St. Gallen’s long-term project “Region, Nation, and Beyond: An Interdisciplinary and Transcultural Reconsideration of Ukraine” aimed to overcome the stereotypical macroregional method. Three all-Ukrainian surveys, conducted in March 2013, February-March 2015 and October 2017, drew from a countrywide sample, representative of Ukraine’s profile for the administrative units, types of settlement, gender, and age (18 years and older). The sample was large enough (N=6000, margin of error ≈ 2%) to conduct a spatial data analysis by representing each oblast separately and to avoid the pre-defined macro-regional grouping. Because of the military conflict, the surveys of 2015 and 2017 covered neither the occupied territories of Donetsk and Luhansk oblast, nor annexed Crimea, while the 2013 survey was conducted in all Ukrainian regions.

As any other methodologies, a statistical questionnaire has its advantages and disadvantages as a tool of studying the phenomenon of collective memory. Thus, it allows us to speak about general tendencies in collective remembrance, while the personal dimension as well as the motivations behind certain choices remain beyond its scope. A block of questions concerning the perception of Ukrainian history was asked. In order to avoid imposing a specific frame of answers, a set of open questions about positive/negative events and personalities in Ukrainian history was purposely placed before another set, which included close-ended questions measuring the respondents’ attitudes towards pre-given events and personalities. As a result, the surveys provide us with interesting information about the structure and dynamics of the respondents’ attitudes towards Ukrainian history and official memory discourse. While many factors can influence popular perceptions of history (age, education, gender, type of settlement, native language, to name but a few), in this article, I will mainly focus on the regional dimensions of collective remembrance and its dynamics since 2013.

Ukrainian memory politics has often been discussed as a space where several dominant metanarratives – primarily the (neo)Soviet and the national Ukrainian – clash and coexist. The history of World War II has been one of the major bat-
tledefields of these narratives, exacerbated by its aggressive instrumentalisation by contemporary Russian propaganda. The memory of WWII has been actively weaponized in Russian media in the context of the Ukrainian crisis – e.g. by portraying participants of the Euromaidan protest as “fascists” or describing the Ukrainian “Anti-Terrorist Operation” as a series of brutal acts of violence committed by “banderites” and “ukro-fascists” against the civilian (Russophone) population. These categories are highly emotionally loaded and belong to the Soviet-Russian narrative of the “Great Patriotic War”. As Elizaveta Gaufman has shown, this instrumentalization of Russian war memory has been very successful in stigmatizing and demonizing the Ukrainian side in the conflict.

Post-Euromaidan memory actors have undertaken significant efforts to promote a counter-Soviet narrative of WWII. One of the first changes in the representation of WWII symbolism was the introduction of a new symbol of Victory Day in 2014 – the red poppy and the famous slogan “Never Again”. New symbols of victory were supposed to show the ethnic (Ukrainian) dimension of this global event and, at the same time, emphasise the Ukrainian role in European memory culture. As Yuliya Yurchuk argues, by trying to eliminate Soviet legacies, memory politics in Ukraine became re-oriented from one master narrative (Soviet) toward another large master narrative, which is considered European or global. The transnational framework of remembering thus became used as a resource both for justification of national memory politics and for marking a re-orientation in geopolitics. This way, transnational “united victory” and commemoration of war victims is constructed as a feasible alternative to the narrative of the Soviet “Great Victory”. Following this logic, 8 May was officially declared the Day of Memory and Reconciliation, and 9 May was declared the Day of Victory over Nazism in the Second World War. The latter still remains one of the most important holidays in Ukraine – with

Figure 1. Created by Anna Chebotarova©. Celebration of the Victory Day (%) and the definition of Second World War (%) per oblast (Survey 2013 and 2017).
75% celebrating it in 2013, 71% in 2015 and 70.5% in 2017 (Survey data).

As figure 1 demonstrates, in almost all Ukrainian regions, 70-98% of the respondents continue to celebrate 9 May. The only exception is Western Ukraine, where the numbers were rather heterogeneous: e.g., in 2013 only 27.3% in the Lvivska and 38.1% in the Zakarpatska oblast claimed to celebrate the Victory Day, while in Bukovyna 63.2% celebrated it and in the Volyn oblast this number was as high as 86.4%. One of the explanations for such intraregional differences is the discourse of Soviet rule as a “second occupation”, which is more prominent in Galicia and Zakarpattia, but not everywhere in Western Ukraine. As of 2013, a majority of respondents in all oblasts except Lvivska and Ternopilska also considered the Soviet term “Great Patriotic War” to be the correct title of the war with Nazi Germany (59.8%). Other options – “Second World War” and “German-Soviet War” got much lower support (30.2% and 5% respectively). The situation shifted in 2017 – the “Second World War” (40.7%) and “Great Patriotic War” (43%) becoming equally popular terms with the former dominating in Western, Central and partially Southern regions (Figure 1). While this may signalise the widespread shift towards departing from the Soviet myth of the Great Patriotic war, we may assume that the vernacular understanding of these two concepts is much less antagonistic, and is not necessarily perceived in terms of clashing Soviet vs. Ukrainian memory projects. World War II remains one of the major personal historical experiences: thus 68% of Ukrainians claim that they had family members or relatives who had died in this war. In both the 2013 and the 2017 surveys, WWII was generally considered one of the most important events in the history of Ukraine (mean value 4.49 in 2013 and 4.56 in 2017 on a scale between 1= not important at all and 5=very important). This indicator was slightly lower in the Galicia and Bukovyna regions in Ukraine’s West (between 3.3 and 4.1), while in all other regions, WWII was considered equally important.

The attitudes to the history of OUN and UPA are much more diverse and polarised: some Ukrainians believe that they were Nazi collaborators; others consider the UPA and its leader Stepan Bandera to be heroic fighters for Ukrainian independence. During the Soviet period, the OUN and the UPA were commonly presented as traitors, but in independent Ukraine, the question arose whether they should continue to be considered heroes who fought for an independent Ukrainian state. As Shevel notes, the dominant narratives on the OUN-UPA issue advanced by the political elites do not give Ukrainians a choice other than “heroes and freedom fighters” or “traitors and murderers” when it comes to remembering these groups. The “decommunisation” laws and their authors were most harshly criticised for making it a punishable offense to publicly display “disrespectful attitudes” to the nationalist underground.

In both the 2013 and 2017 surveys, the OUN and UPA appeared on both lists of the most positive and most negative actors in the history of Ukraine, reflecting the
polarised and ambiguous attitudes towards the war-time nationalistic movement. The average perception of the OUN and UPA’s importance for Ukrainian history has grown (from 3.35 in 2013 to 3.73 in 2017). While generally the share of respondents who believe the UPA should be recognised as fighters for Ukraine has increased (from 32.4% in 2013 to 47.1% in 2017), these numbers vary significantly across the regions (Figure 2).

In 2013, approximately one-third of Ukrainians (32.4%) supported the idea of recognising OUN and UPA as fighters for Ukrainian independence. This support scattered from 4 to 7% in Donbas and Crimea to 77.7% in Volyn and over 90% in Galicia (Lvivska, Ternopilska and Ivano-Frankivska oblast). In all the other oblasts (including Western-Ukrainian Zakarpattia and Bukovyna) this number did not exceed 45%. Therefore, in 2013 the “heroic” memory of the UPA was rather limited to the regions, where the nationalist underground had been most active in the 1940-50s, being strongly entwined in the canvasses of family memories. The situation has changed as of 2017 with popular support growing to 47.1%. This may be one of the outcomes of the promotion and legitimisation of the UPA on the official level through the narrative connection with other military and political organisations that fought for independence, including contemporary Ukrainian soldiers of the Donbas war. We observe the most significant growth of support for the recognition of the UPA in parts of Western Ukraine (by over 30% in the Zakarpattia and Bukovyna regions) as well as in several oblasts of Central and Southern Ukraine (Vinnytsia, Kirovohrad and Kherson – by over 20%). At the same time, support for this idea remains uneven, not exceeding 30% in many regions (Figure 2).

Along with the efforts to promote the recognition of the OUN and UPA, the “de-communisation” laws banned Soviet symbols, monuments and names from use in

Figure 2. Created by Anna Chebotarova©. Importance of the UPA for Ukrainian history and the attitudes towards the recognition of the OUN and UPA as fighters for Ukrainian independence (Survey 2013 and 2017).
the public sphere and toponomy. By 2016, 51,493 streets and 987 cities and villages were renamed, and 1,320 Lenin monuments and 1,069 monuments to other communist figures were removed.\textsuperscript{28} As Andrii Nekoliak\textsuperscript{29} shows, territorial communities and local self-government bodies often sabotaged the execution of the “decommunization” law. One of the most notable examples comes from Kharkiv, a large city in Eastern Ukraine, where in June 2019, the city council decided to return the old Soviet name of Marshal Georgii Zhukov to one of the streets. This way, the council has undermined a decision by the region’s Kyiv-appointed governor.\textsuperscript{30}

The 2015 survey was conducted in March – less than one month before the adoption of the “decommunisation” legislation. It gives us the possibility to explore the attitudes in Ukrainian society towards the idea of such a radical recodification of public space prior to its abrupt implementation. In 2015, around 40% of the respondents opposed the demolition of Soviet monuments in Ukraine and an equal percentage of respondents supported this idea.\textsuperscript{31} However, the support was significantly higher in the regions where the grass-root “Leninfall” took place in the dusk of Ukrainian independence – namely the Lvivska and Ivano-Frankivska oblast (over 90%). In 2017 this balance shifted towards predominant support of de-Sovietisation (46.1%), yet significant regional differences have persisted (Figure 3).

While in most oblasts outside Western Ukraine the level of support for the demolition of Soviet monuments in 2017 remained moderate (between 20 and 60%), the attitudes towards this idea in the Eastern regions varied. For example, twice as many respondents supported the “Leninfall” in the Zaporizhzhia oblast (45.1%) than in the Kharkiv, Mykolayiv or Odesa oblast (around 20%) (Figure 3). Popular attitudes to the Soviet past remain ambiguous – thus, when asked to name the most positive and negative events in the history of Ukraine, respondents tend to include the Soviet period into both lists. However, in 2015, the percentage of those

![Figure 3. Created by Anna Chebotarova©. Percentage of supporters of demolishing Soviet monuments (Survey 2015 and 2017).](image-url)
who mourn the collapse of the USSR has dropped more than twice (7% comparing to 18% in 2013). The holidays that belong to Soviet Ukrainian tradition are still largely observed – apart from widely popular 9 May (Victory Day), 40% of respondents celebrated the 1 May (Labour Day), and 77% – 8 March (Women’s Day) (Survey 2017). The only Soviet holiday that has sharply lost its popularity in all regions is 23 February (Defenders Day) – from 69% in 2013 to 38.5% in 2015. Established as the Day of the Soviet Army in 1919, it has acquired a more neutral meaning of “Men’s Day” since the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, in the light of the Ukrainian-Russian conflict, we might assume that this holiday is losing its popularity because of its association with Russian militarism (today it is also celebrated as the Day of the Russian Army).

The current “remembering to forget” attitude towards the communist past, which regards it as a problem that does not fit into the new model of Ukrainian history, downplays the Soviet experience beyond political terror and repressions. Yet for most of the Ukrainian population, it remains a vivid part of their personal biography. Evoking contradictory emotions – from total rejection to nostalgic reminiscences – the Soviet past of Ukraine should become a subject of new interpretations and a broader societal dialogue, as the policy of decommunisation remains a divisive factor.

Conclusions and discussion

As our analysis demonstrates, against the background of a growing radicalisation of history politics in 2015-2019, the Ukrainian society preserved its memory pluralism, which does not fall into the simple categories of an “East-West” divide. The mnemonic landscape of contemporary Ukrainian society is characterised by the kaleidoscopic regionally-varied vision of Ukraine without any stable macroregions. While certain aspects of WWII and the Soviet past are re-evaluated in the light of the recent conflict with Russia, the dominant approach towards the past is an ambivalent amalgam of Soviet and national-Ukrainian discourses. As Shevel argues, widespread attitudinal ambivalence can potentially serve as a basis for the emergence of a more pluralistic memory regime over the long term, even in the absence of elite actors advocating such a regime at the official level. Our survey shows that such demand for a more pluralistic and dialogical model of history persists in Ukrainian society despite the exhausting conflict of the past 6 years.

After the dismissal of Volodymyr Viatrovych from the post of the head of the UINM in September 2019, the course of memory politics under President Zelensky is likely to change. For now, it is obvious that Zelensky and his party give memory politics a much narrower role than their predecessors – e.g. the program of the pro-presidential party “Servant of the People” does not mention history at all. On 11 December 2019, Ukraine’s Cabinet of Ministers appointed Anton Drobovych,
34-years-old director of educational programs at the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Centre, to head the UINM. Many analysts perceived this appointment as a significant turn in Ukrainian memory politics since 2014. In one of his first public interviews, Drobovych promised to “make the official memory politics in Ukraine more balanced and liberal” as well as to “prevent the institution from being perceived as a mouthpiece for agitation, ideological struggle or propaganda, and to make it a tool for citizens to foster public dialogue”.

However, the current crisis in public health and economic sectors due to the coronavirus pandemic is likely to push the debate on historical politics to the margins of societal priorities. The Ukrainian government has already announced significant budget sequester – particularly in the spheres of education and culture. Thus, the state funding for the UINM might be reduced by as much as 52%. Whether this will result in the rollback or reboot of state-sanctioned memory politics or not remains an open question.

About the author

Anna Chebotarova (née Susak) is a research fellow at the School for Humanities and Social Sciences, St. Gallen University (Switzerland) and the coordinator of the initiative “Ukrainian Regionalism: a Research Platform”. She is a PhD candidate at the Graduate School for Social Research (Warsaw, Poland) and also affiliated with the Centre for Urban History in East-Central Europe (Lviv, Ukraine).


3 Subotic, Yellow Star, Red Star, 44


14 Bernhard and Kubik, Twenty Years after Communism, 7-37


Yurchuk, “Global Symbols and Local Meanings...”.


Tarik Amar, Ihor Balynsyi, and Yaroslav Hrytsak, eds., Strasti za Banderoiu, De profundis (Kyïv: Hrani-T, 2010).

See more: Yuliya Yurchuk, Reordering of Meaningful Worlds: Memory of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army in Post-Soviet Ukraine, n.d.

Shevel, “No Way Out? Post-Soviet Ukraine’s Memory Wars in Comparative Perspective”.

The question was formulated as follows: “Please evaluate the importance of the listed events in Ukrainian history on a scale between 1=not important at all and 5=very important”.

For example, an exhibition “Objective history”, presenting photos from the UPA underground archive along with the photos from the Anti-terrorist operation in Donbas, opened in October 2017 in The National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War. The exhibition was later shown at the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine. See: http://mincult.kmu.gov.ua/control/uk/publish/article?art_id=245311046&cat_id=244913751, accessed 15 April 2020.


Nekoliak, “Cultures of History Forum”.

The question was formulated as following: “What is your attitude on the demolition of monuments to Lenin and other Soviet leaders in Ukraine?” with 1=fully support, 2=rather support, 3=neutral, 4=rather oppose, 5=fully oppose.


Shevel, “No Way Out? Post-Soviet Ukraine’s Memory Wars in Comparative Perspective”.

