

# *Historical Legacies and the Outbreak of the Ukrainian Civil War*

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The outbreak of any civil war these days is accompanied by the appearance of pundits who wring their hands, furrow their brows and attempt to explain to the CNN audience what went wrong. The case of Ukraine is no different. From the beginning of the conflict, experts have presented various arguments as to the reasons why a population previously united for centuries by a common history and high rates of intermarriage should suddenly implode in violence.

Two competing explanations dominate the public sphere, one driven by Russian state-controlled media, the other by an outraged “liberal media” in the United States and Europe. The broadly-accepted narrative in the West is almost self-evident; Putin is an evil dictator and is out to prevent Ukraine from joining its rightful place among democratic, Western nations; the civil conflict in the Donbass is entirely his fault. The counter-narrative coming from Russian media is equally fantastic: in this view, the war is the fault of the evil

West, which has always been out to destroy Russia and is now pursuing this aim by wresting Ukraine from Russia's traditional sphere of influence.

Working quietly in their university or institute offices, professional scholars and experts on the former Soviet region are producing more nuanced arguments, focusing on issues of linguistic and ethnic identity, intermixed with some acknowledgment of the role of economic interests. A glance at existing social science theory about the causes of civil war suggests that they are right to reject simplistic explanations privileging either an "evil Putin" or an equally "evil West," primarily because the causes of civil war appear to be correlated to domestic causes much more than to the actions of pernicious outside powers.

Of the possible domestic causes of civil wars, existing scholarship leans in the direction of supporting Paul Collier and his colleagues at the World Bank, who argue that economic causes (referred to in this model as "greed") are primary. While agreeing in principle with the idea that there are economic factors at play in the Ukrainian situation—particularly the interests of various local oligarchs—this picture is too simple. Any comprehensive analysis of the current tragedy in the Donbass should include an examination of the way in which historical legacies are shaping the mentality of the people involved in the conflict, acting as blinders preventing them from understanding the other side's viewpoint and from achieving a lasting peaceful resolution.

It is a well-known cliché that the "Russian and Ukrainian peoples share a common history." The manner in which this history is interpreted, however, varies widely across Russia and the diverse Ukrainian regions. In a way that is most relevant for the present civil war, this difference of interpretation especially concerns the experience of World War II.

The dominant narrative in Russia is quite simple: World War II was "The Great Fatherland War," which united all the peoples of the USSR in an epic fight against German fascism, and which was so great a victory that it absolves Stalin for his otherwise heinous treatment of his own citizens. Historical facts that don't fit into this scheme—i.e., examples of Soviet citizens collaborating with the Germans or worse yet, fighting on their side—are explained, if at all, by reference to those citizens' treasonable nature, and, in the case of Ukraine and the Baltics, by the existence of local fascist movements. Generally speaking, however, the traditional May 9th celebrations across both the Russian Federation occur without any mention of collaboration at all.

In Ukraine, the situation has been more complex. In much of the eastern and southern parts of the country, the Russian narrative predominates. For Ukrainians living in those regions—whether they consider themselves to be ethnic Russians, so-called "Russian-speaking Ukrainians" or ethnic Ukrainians—the memory of World War II is indeed of a conflict in which they, their fathers and/or their grandfathers heroically defeated fascist Germany. In western Ukraine, however, the war is remembered quite differently, as a time during which the Ukrainian people, led by the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), banded together to fight for national independence, both against the Nazis and against Stalin. World War II is interpreted as a tragic time in which the Red Army ultimately crushed aspirations of national liberation, achieved only fifty years later with the collapse of the USSR. At the same time, the narrative in eastern and southern Ukraine presents the OUN and its leader Stepan



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Bandera as unequivocal supporters of German-style fascism, and therefore unacceptable candidates for the role of national heroes.

The role of these conflicting interpretations in the current Ukrainian crisis is obvious. In the early years after independence, the Ukrainian leadership understood that it ruled over a country divided not only ethnically and linguistically but by very different understandings of past history, and did not actively work to impose one version of the national narrative over the entire country. The election of Yushchenko in the wake of the Orange Revolution brought about an important change, as he began to rather overtly privilege the Western Ukrainian version of World War II. For the eastern and southern regions, this signified government support for sympathizers with Nazi Germany and a negation of their own families' sacrifices in the fight for a fascism-free Europe. Ten years later, the very visible glorification of the OUN by some participants of the 2014 overthrow of Yanukovich only served to convince important segments of the eastern and southern Ukrainian citizenry that a post-Maidan government would impose a Western-Ukrainian narrative upon them. The logical consequences of this appeared to be the imposition of fascism in Ukraine and Hitler's victory from beyond the grave.

Untangling this web of mutually-exclusive versions of relatively recent history is a tremendous challenge. However, for Ukraine to emerge from its present civil conflict with any sense of national unity (a prerequisite for a successful future), the past must be dealt with in a conciliatory way. One possible way forward is the recognition that both versions are historically simply inaccurate.

On the one hand, the "unifying" story preferred by the current Russian regime and widely accepted in eastern and southern Ukraine does not hold up under close historical analysis. Collaboration by Soviet citizens with the Germans was widespread and profound, to the point where approximately 20% of soldiers serving in the German army against the Soviet Union were themselves of Soviet origin. While some existing scholarship reduces the phenomenon to an anti-Soviet revolt by ethnic minorities living on the periphery of the USSR (Balts, Ukrainians, Georgians, etc.), recent investigations demonstrate conclusively that a significant segment of even the ethnically Russian population saw the Germans as a force meant to liberate them from Stalin's regime and acted accordingly.

On the other hand, the version in which the OUN was a non-fascist patriotic organization leading the Ukrainian people in a heroic fight against both Germany and the USSR is also deeply flawed. It is true that, after 1943, the OUN's armed wing did engage the Germans in armed combat. At the same time, historical evidence clearly indicates that the leadership of the OUN was profoundly influenced by Nazi ideology and that Bandera and his cohorts did initially intend for an independent Ukrainian state to form an integral part of Hitler's "New Europe." In this newly liberated Ukraine, there would be no room for anyone other than Ukrainians, meaning the extermination or at the very least the banishment of Poles, Jews and Russians living on its territory. The fact that the Germans themselves did not want an independent Ukraine and had Bandera arrested in 1941 led eventually to a reconsideration of the OUN's desire to ally itself with Germany, and to the above mentioned armed confrontations. This does not, however, erase the uncomfortable reality that OUN's ideology remained fascist at its core and that its armed activities involved war crimes against both minorities and those Ukrainians who did not agree with the OUN's vision of independent Ukraine.

Mutual recognition of this tangled history—perhaps beginning with truth-seeking commissions comprised of historians from both sides of the current conflict and continuing with an educational campaign in the post-conflict phase—would go a long way towards ensuring Ukrainian national reconciliation.