# HISTORY AS A BATTLEFIELD: CONFLICTING INTERPRETATIONS OF THE PAST IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

# POLICY PAPERS 04/2025

## **Reviewers**

Dr hab. Professor Georgiy Kasianov, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin Dr Andrei Znamenski, Professor of History, The University of Memphis

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## Published and edited by

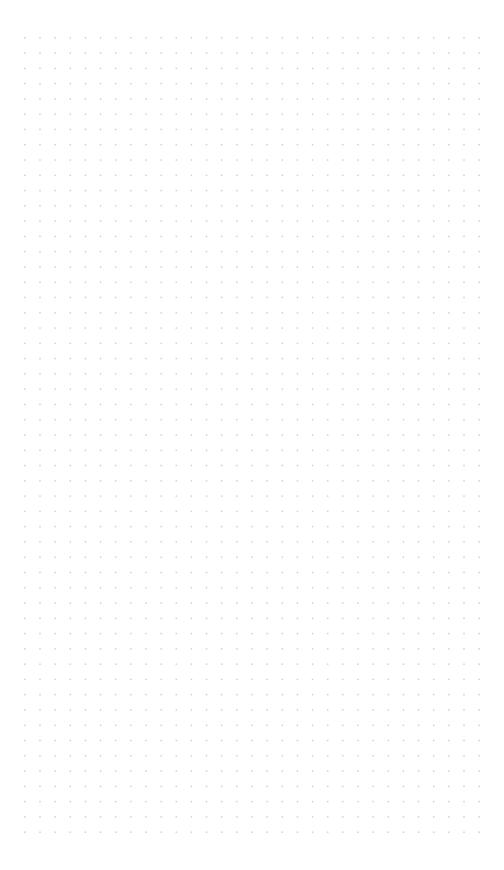
Instytut Europy Środkowej | Institute of Central Europe ul. Niecała 5 20-080 Lublin, Poland www.ies.lublin.pl

Cover design and typesetting Amadeusz Targoński

Print www.drukarniaakapit.pl

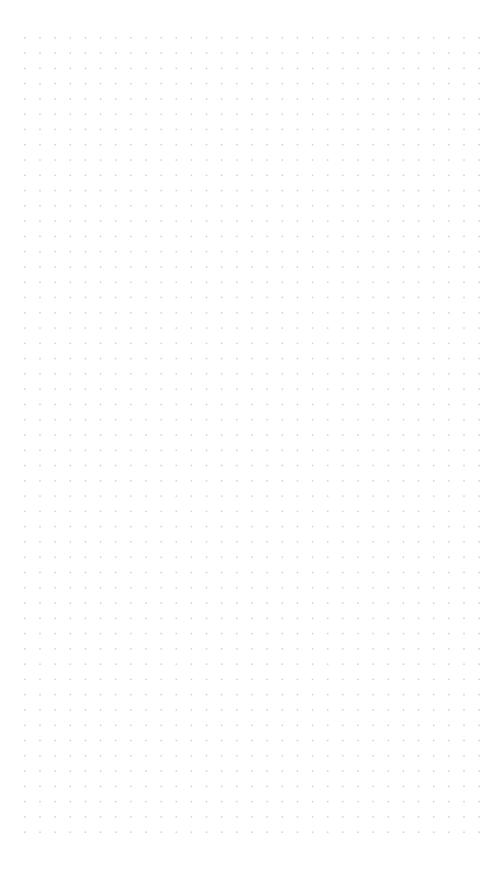
# HISTORY AS A BATTLEFIELD: CONFLICTING INTERPRETATIONS OF THE PAST IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

Edited by Hanna Bazhenova



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# **SUMMARY**

Since the collapse of communism in 1989–91, competing interpretations of the past have become powerful instruments in domestic and international politics in Central and Eastern Europe. In what scholars call "mnemonic battles", "memory wars", and "mnemonic security" strategies, states and political actors instrumentalise memory to secure national unity, marginalise opponents, and define friend and foe. The Russo–Ukrainian War has significantly intensified these processes in the region, demonstrating that memory has increasingly become a battlefield where historical narratives are mobilised not only to settle the past but also to wage battles in the present.

In Lithuania, this dynamic is evident in the politicisation of historical memory, which has shifted from the "occupation paradigm" towards the "collaboration paradigm". This reorientation moves attention away from foreign perpetrators and national heroes to local agents of Sovietisation, thereby broadening the notion of collaboration. Current public debates centre on issues such as Lithuanians' involvement in the Holocaust and Soviet repression, the scope and content of de-Sovietisation, and the contemporary use of independence narratives. Exploiting public demands for truth and justice, politicians instrumentalise these sensitive topics to consolidate their popularity and discredit opponents. As a result, polarisation within Lithuanian society continues to deepen.

In Belarus, by contrast, the interpretation of history is gradually losing its prominence in the official discourse. Since a flurry of initiatives in 2021–22, when policies such as the recognition of the genocide of the Belarusian people were introduced, historical politics has largely continued in an inertial fashion. Memory practices have become increasingly ritualised. At the same time, the rhetoric has shifted:

the current confrontation with the West has fostered a new framing of the Great Patriotic War, presenting the "collective West" as an eternal enemy. This narrative allows Belarusian authorities to demonstrate support for Russia while avoiding deeper involvement in the war.

In Ukraine, the ongoing military conflict has resulted in the reinforcement of nationalist narratives in memory politics, particularly through the glorification of Stepan Bandera. Promoted by the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory, intellectuals, and nationalist forces, this retrotopian image of Bandera as a fighter against Russian imperialism bears little resemblance to the historical figure and discourages critical scholarship of his biography. Meanwhile, Russian propaganda exploits this image to discredit Ukraine as a "Bandera state". However, the heroisation of Bandera and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army has become deeply embedded in Ukraine's wartime narrative of resistance, making it difficult for the authorities to revise this stance, despite the challenges it poses for Polish–Ukrainian relations and for integration into the European culture of remembrance.

# **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

**HU-LCD** Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats

IEŚ Institute of Central Europe
KGB Committee for State Security
LCP Lithuanian Communist Party

**LDLP** Lithuanian Democratic Labour Party

LJC Lithuanian Jewish Community

LSDP Lithuanian Social Democratic Party

MGB Ministry of State Security
MSFL Movement for the Struggle
for Freedom of Lithuania

NATO North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NKGB People's Commissariat for State Security
 NKVD People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs
 OUN Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists
 OUN-B Bandera faction of the Organisation

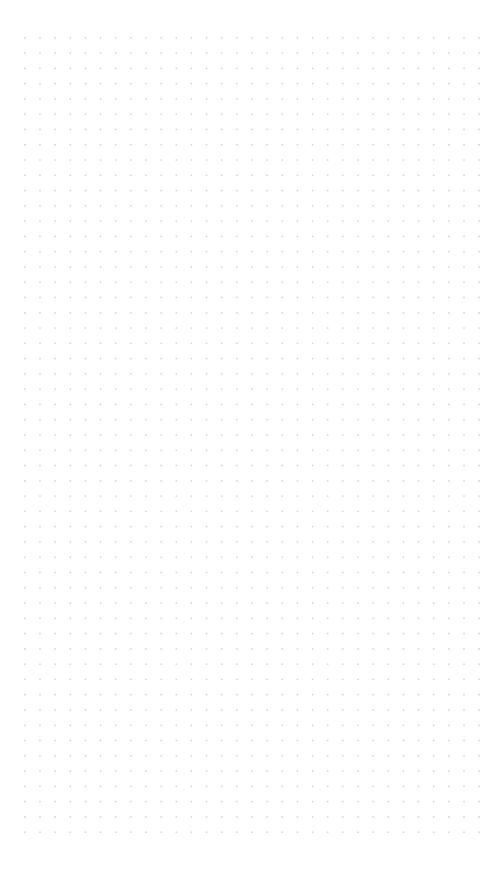
of Ukrainian Nationalists

**UINM** Ukrainian Institute of National Memory

**UPA** Ukrainian Insurgent Army

**USSR** Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

**НЛО** New Literary Review



# Introduction

# HISTORY AND MEMORY UNDER SIEGE

## Hanna Bazhenova

Historiography is not an exchange in the marketplace but a fight on the battlefield. It has a particular point of view on the past and punishes opponents; it is power politics masked as tolerant neutrality.<sup>1</sup>

Battles over historical legitimacy have simmered throughout centuries and continue to this day. These are essentially power struggles over the hegemony of narratives and patterns of interpretation of the past. As American historian Michael J. Connolly noted, "To control historiography is to control the understanding of the past. To control the understanding of the past is to control what are acceptable interpretations of the past and the values behind them. It is the power to legitimise and stigmatise." Consequently, both history and collective memory have become political battlegrounds of the present.

This is very much the case in Central and Eastern Europe, where history is not merely remembered – it is fought over. Since the collapse of communism in 1989–91, competing

Michael J. Connolly, "The Past as Battlefield: The Power of Historiography", The Imaginative Conservative, 4 January 2021, accessed 27 July 2025, https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2021/01/past-battlefield-power-historiography-michael-connolly.html.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Connolly, "The Past as Battlefield...".

interpretations (narratives) of the past have become powerful tools in domestic and international politics, legitimising political regimes and justifying policies. In what scholars call "mnemonic battles"<sup>3</sup>, "memory wars"<sup>4</sup>, and "mnemonic security" strategies<sup>5</sup>, states and political actors instrumentalise memory to secure national unity, marginalise opponents, and define friend and foe. In this regard, the Russo–Ukrainian War can be seen as a classic example of the instrumentalisation and weaponisation of memory.

This story began in the mid-2000s when the Russian Federation developed memory wars with Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Ukraine<sup>6</sup>. This was a "response" to the growing presence of anti-Russian motifs in the memory politics of these states, which became particularly evident in the context of celebrations of the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II<sup>7</sup>. Lithuania and Estonia refused to participate in the 2005 Moscow Victory Day celebration. Latvia was represented but expressed strong criticism of the event, with President Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga once again calling on Russia to condemn the Molotov—Ribbentrop Pact of 1939. Poland also sent a delegation to Moscow, led by President Aleksander Kwaśniewski, and used the occasion

Eviatar Zerubavel, "Social memories: steps to a sociology of the past", Qualitative Sociology 19, no. 3 (1996): 283-99.

Nikolay Koposov, Memory Laws, Memory Wars. The Politics of the Past in Europe and Russia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

Maria Mälksoo, "Memory Must Be Defended: Beyond the Politics of Mnemonical Security", Security Dialogue 46, no. 3 (June 2015): 221– 37; Jelena Subotic, Yellow Star, Red Star: Holocaust Remembrance after Communism (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 2019).

Georgiy Kasianov, "Challenges of antagonistic memory: Scholars versus politics and war", Memory Studies 15, no. 6 (2022): 1295. See also Tatiana Zhurzhenko, "War and Memory in the Post-Soviet Space: Arming without Borders?", Körber-Stiftung, Ukraine & Beyond, March 2022, accessed 27 July 2025, https://koerber-stiftung.de/en/projects/ukraine-beyond/krieg-und-erinnerung-im-postsowjetischen-raum-bewaffnung-ohne-grenzen/.

Alexei Miller, Russia and Europe in memory wars (Oslo: Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 2020), 11.

to highlight the double occupation the country had experienced during the war8.

Intensification of Russia's politics of memory occurred after President Vladimir Putin's speech at the 43rd Munich Security Conference in 2007, where he for the first time firmly rejected the US-led post-Cold War order, and after the military conflict with Georgia that followed in 2008. In May 2009, President Dmitry Medvedev signed a decree that established the Presidential Commission to Counter Attempts to Falsify History to the Detriment of Russia's Interests9. The creation of this Commission marked an important step in the institutionalisation of memory politics, as it explicitly targeted narratives that challenged Russia's official interpretation of its imperial or Soviet pasts. Although the Commission was formally dissolved in 2012, the general approach that it championed remains in place<sup>10</sup>. It laid the foundation for a broader ideological campaign that began with Putin's third presidency, in which historical narratives and memory became central to the construction of national identity and to international relations.

This shift should be seen not only in the context of the geopolitical situation of the time, but also as a response to internal developments in Russia, including the mass civic protests of 2011–12 in major cities, which were triggered

Дмитрий Иванов, "Праздничный парад с международным участием. Торжества в честь юбилея Победы над Германией как предмет кремлевской дипломатии", Lenta.ru, 11 May 2005, accessed 28 July 2025, https://lenta.ru/articles/2005/05/10/pobeda/; "Konferencja prasowa Prezydenta RP", Prezydent.pl, 9 May 2005, accessed 28 July 2025, https://www.prezydent.pl/kancelaria/archiwum/archiwum-aleksandra-kwasniewskiego/aktualnosci/rok-2005/konferencja-prasowa-prezydenta-rp,28967,archive.

See Pål Kolstø, "Dmitrii Medvedev's Commission Against the Falsification of History: Why Was It Created and What Did It Achieve? A Reassessment", *The Slavonic and East European Review* 97, no. 4 (October 2019): 738–60.

Julie Fedor, "'Historical Falsification' as a Master Trope in the Official Discourse on History Education in Putin's Russia", Journal of Educational Media, Memory, and Society 13, no. 1 (Spring 2021): 111.

primarily by a crisis of legitimacy, distrust in parliamentary and presidential election results, and disappointment with President Medvedev's modernisation policy. In line with the Soviet intellectual tradition of the Cold War era, the Kremlin increasingly framed Russia as a "besieged fortress" defending its national sovereignty and history against constant internal and external threats. The "fortress" narrative became a key tool to delegitimise domestic opposition and justify assertive policies abroad. In this context, memory of the Great Patriotic War and the Great Victory, central to modern Russian identity<sup>11</sup>, was transformed into an important tool to strengthen both domestic legitimacy and foreign policy.

Against the backdrop of escalating geopolitical confrontation with the West following the Euromaidan and annexation of Crimea in 2014, coupled with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO's) growing military presence in Central and Eastern Europe and the possibility of Georgia and Ukraine joining NATO, securitisation of history in Russia intensified. The state leadership increasingly used historical arguments to justify its political decisions<sup>12</sup>. This tightening grip over historical discourse coincided with Russia's growing critique of its neighbours' memory policies, particularly those of Ukraine and the Baltic states, which promoted alternative versions of memory of World War II. These patterns became even more pronounced with the full-scale invasion of 2022, when Putin denied Ukraine's legitimacy as a historical and political entity in speeches

See Ольга Ю. Малинова, "Великая Отечественная война как символический ресурс: эволюция отображения в официальной риторике 2000–2010 гг.", Россия и современность, № 2(87) (2015): 6–29; Ольга Ю. Малинова, Актуальное прошлое: Символическая политика властвующей элиты и дилеммы российской идентичности (Москва: РОССПЭН, 2015), 100–15.

Hanna Bazhenova, "Federacja Rosyjska: od poszukiwania idei narodowej do polityzacji historii", Komentarze Instytutu Europy Środkowej, nr 1328 (68/2025), 7 April 2025, https://ies.lublin.pl/komentarze/federacja-rosyjska-od-poszukiwania-idei-narodowej-do-polityzacji-historii/.

and public statements<sup>13</sup>, framing the war as a mission "to restore historical justice"<sup>14</sup>. In this context, the weaponisation of memory emerged as a distinct dimension of the Russo–Ukrainian conflict.

Since February 2022, the politics of memory has intensified across the whole of Central and Eastern Europe. This policy paper brings together three case studies that illustrate how memory is instrumentalised in the Lithuanian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian political contexts. Together, these studies reveal a broader regional trend: memory has increasingly become a battlefield where historical narratives are mobilised not to settle the past but to wage battles in the present.

The first chapter, written by Rasa Čepaitienė, discusses elements of Lithuanian politics of history<sup>15</sup> and public debate that are exploited in political competition both domestically and internationally. Focusing on the years 2020–25, during which both "right"- and "left"-wing coalitions were in power, it examines sensitive issues such as involvement in the Holocaust and Soviet repression, the scope and content of de-Sovietisation, and contemporary use of independence narratives. The author argues that these topics remain highly manipulative and instrumentalised, with politicians using them not to establish historical truth or seek justice but rather to discredit and demean political opponents. She also concludes that the "occupation paradigm", established

See Georgiy Kasianov, "The War Over Ukrainian Identity", Foreign Affairs, 4 May 2022, accessed 29 July 2025, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-05-04/war-over-ukrainian-identity.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> See, for example, "Пленарное заседание Петербургского международного экономического форума", *Президент России*, 17 June 2022, accessed 29 July 2025, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68669; Владимир Путин, "Послание Президента Федеральному Собранию", *Президент России*, 21 February 2023, accessed 29 July 2025, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70565.

Throughout this policy paper, the terms "politics of history" and "historical politics" are used interchangeably to refer to the political instrumentalisation of the past.

early in Lithuania's official memory discourse, shifts towards the "collaboration paradigm", concentrating on local agents of Sovietisation and thereby significantly broadening the notion of collaboration.

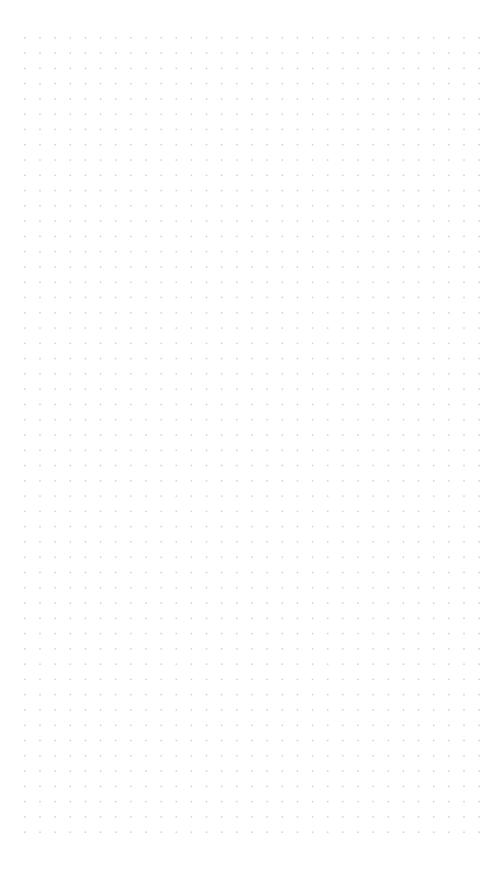
In the second chapter, Aliaksei Lastouski focuses on the transformation of historical politics in Belarus following the start of Russian aggression in Ukraine in February 2022. Based on his monitoring of Belarusian media, he argues that priorities are evolving and that the interpretation of history is gradually losing its leading position in the political discourse of the Belarusian authorities. The author highlights the inertial continuation of the direction of historical politics established in 2021-22, when several new significant initiatives, such as recognition of the genocide of the Belarusian people, were launched. Afterwards, only a few new initiatives emerged, although official rhetoric underwent notable changes. For example, a new framework was built around the interpretation of the Great Patriotic War. The current confrontation with the West fostered the creation of an enduring image of the "collective West" as an eternal enemy, accused of unleashing World War II and orchestrating the genocide of the Belarusian people. This rhetoric enables the Belarusian authorities to express verbal support for Russia while avoiding deeper involvement in the military conflict.

The third and final chapter, written by Yurii Latysh, examines the evolution of attitudes towards Stepan Bandera in Ukraine during the Russo—Ukrainian War. Noting that the politics of memory is under state control, the author argues that during the ongoing military conflict, Ukrainian authorities have pursued a strategy of the "mnemonic warrior", using Bandera as Russia's enemy No. 1 to mentally mobilise the population. The pro-Bandera nationalist consensus is ensured by the unity of nationalists, a large segment of intellectuals, the government, and the support of part of the population. The latter changed its attitude towards the leader of the revolutionary faction of the Organisation

of Ukrainian Nationalists following the full-scale Russian invasion. At the same time, Bandera remains a *stolperstein* (stumbling block) in Polish–Ukrainian relations and an obstacle to Ukraine's integration into the European culture of remembrance.

This policy paper is, in a sense, a continuation of two publications issued by the Institute of Central Europe in 2022 and 2023: Constructing Memory: Central and Eastern Europe in the New Geopolitical Reality and Russia's War in Ukraine: Implications for the Politics of History in Central and Eastern Europe<sup>16</sup>. Their primary goal was to examine how the Russo–Ukrainian War affected the politics of history in Central and Eastern European states and the challenges it posed for the region's memory politics and culture of remembrance. The present policy paper goes a step further, seeking also to trace the dynamics and intensity of the ongoing changes in these spheres over a longer time horizon.

Hanna Bazhenova, ed., Constructing Memory: Central and Eastern Europe in the New Geopolitical Reality (Lublin: Instytut Europy Środkowej (IEŚ), 2022); Hanna Bazhenova, ed., Russia's War in Ukraine: Implications for the Politics of History in Central and Eastern Europe (Lublin: IEŚ, 2023).



# Chapter 1

# HISTORY AS A POLITICAL BATTLEGROUND: NARRATING LITHUANIA'S PAST AMID INSTABILITY

# Rasa Čepaitienė

# Introduction

Mass protests broke out in Belarus in 2020. Much of the Belarusian opposition faced repression by the regime and was forced to emigrate to neighbouring countries, including Lithuania. In the following years, Azerbaijan recaptured Nagorno-Karabakh, a region controlled by ethnic Armenian forces since the 1988–94 war, and Russia launched its large-scale military invasion of Ukraine in 2022. All these events shook the post-Soviet region, affecting its security, collective identity, and especially cultural memory, which had remained largely untouched despite a long and contradictory process of sociocultural transformation that had taken place since the early 1990s. It has become clear that de-Sovietisation, mostly identified with removing symbols and signs of Soviet ideology and propaganda from public spaces<sup>1</sup>, is insufficient for post-Soviet countries to feel

Евгений Гонтмахер и Кирилл Рогов, сост., Демонтаж коммунизма. Тридцать лет спустя (Москва: Новое литературное обозрение (НЛО), 2021).

secure and overcome the collective traumas of the recent period of dependence on Russia. Consequently, there is increasing discussion about the necessity of profound decolonisation. This concept is particularly evident in Ukraine (and to a certain extent in Belarus), where significant efforts are being made to distance the national culture from Russian influence and the Russian language. These efforts seek to reject anything associated with Russia's "civilisational mission" and geopolitical significance<sup>2</sup>.

The changing international situation also directly and immediately affected the Lithuanian political scene. Although two successive ruling coalitions, each with different publicly declared ideologies and values, held power between 2020 and 2025³, issues related to historical politics remained a significant part of the public debates they initiated. The Ingrida Šimonytė government (2020–24) consisted of political forces representing the "centre-right wing": the conservative Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats (HU-LCD), the Liberal Movement, and the Freedom Party⁴. In 2024, this coalition was replaced by a "left-wing" government led by Social Democrat Gintautas Paluckas. The new government consisted of the Lithuanian

See Svitlana Biedarieva, Ambicoloniality and War: The Ukrainian-Russian Case (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024).

Lithuania's political landscape makes it difficult to apply the classic political science distinction between "right" and "left". For example, from 1992 to 1996, the "left-wing" Lithuanian Democratic Labour Party (LDLP) – which merged with the Lithuanian Social Democratic Party in 2001 and adopted its name – was accused of pursuing liberal policies. Conversely, the conservative "right-wing" majority that succeeded the LDLP from 1996 to 2000 faced criticism for its social democratic stance. This ideological inconsistency was partly due to Lithuania's objective political and economic circumstances during the transition period, when any government had to navigate between major industrialists, the International Monetary Fund, and an impoverished electorate.

The Freedom Party was established in 2019 and supported the swift implementation of LGBT+-friendly policies and the liberalisation of drug use. It was widely criticised for its extremely narrow political agenda and lack of readiness to govern.

Social Democratic Party (LSDP); the Democratic Union "For Lithuania", established in 2022 and headed by former Prime Minister Saulius Skvernelis; and the party "Nemuno aušra" (Dawn of Nemunas), which emerged at the end of 2023 and is led by the controversial politician Remigijus Žemaitaitis⁵. The fact that most of these ruling parties were created just before elections and have unclear or populist ideologies catering to specific voter segments indicates both the instability of the Lithuanian political system and the electorate's desire to hand over the reins of government to new leaders after being disappointed by previous ones. On the one hand, this may give the impression that frequent references to sensitive historical issues - which will be discussed further below - are merely an attempt to divert public attention from important socioeconomic problems that these new politicians lack the competence and experience to solve. On the other hand, certain historical topics are being revisited because they were not properly resolved in the past, but the deteriorating geopolitical situation in the region is prompting a return to them.

These debates demonstrate that, as in the period just before independence, attention has once again shifted towards the recent past – specifically the events of World War II and the Soviet era. Efforts to exploit these historical narratives for political purposes have intensified, involving not only politicians in high office but also public intellectuals, professional historians, other public figures, and social groups.

On 4 August 2025, Paluckas's government was forced to resign following accusations of corruption against the prime minister. By the time of writing, the coalition government led by Social Democrat Inga Ruginienė had already assumed office. However, it soon encountered coordinated resistance from opposition parties that had lost the previous elections, resulting in recurrent attempts to obstruct cabinet formation and undermine governmental stability. These developments highlight the persistence of confrontational dynamics in Lithuania's post-electoral politics, where institutional governance mechanisms are frequently constrained by partisan polarisation and procedural obstructionism.

Among the actors taking part in these debates have been organisations of Soviet deportees and political prisoners; the Lithuanian Catholic Church, which seeks to commemorate members of its clergy and congregations who were victims of Nazi and Stalinist repression or were involved in the dissident movement during Brezhnev's rule; Lithuanian Jews concerned with commemorating Holocaust victims; and also social media influencers and even some foreign embassies. Among the political parties, however, the HU-LCD stands out in this area. Founded in 1993 by professor of musicology Vytautas Landsbergis, the party identifies with the political and moral capital of the Sajūdis movement<sup>6</sup> and represents "liberal conservatism". During the periods when it formed the ruling majority in parliament (1996-2000, 2008-12, and 2020-24), the HU-LCD was perhaps the most consistent in its efforts to shape both national and party historical politics - more so than its main competitor, the LSDP, let alone other parties. For this reason, HU-LCD's activities in this field deserve closer attention.

This chapter aims to identify the most important "sensitive points" in Lithuanian politics of history that are used for domestic and foreign policy purposes, and to discuss their political, legal, and moral significance today, particularly in the context of creating and maintaining collective identity and new historical narratives. In this regard, three historical narratives continue to stir Lithuanian society. The first is the issue of relations with the Soviet era, which

The Sąjūdis (literally "Movement"), initially known as the Reform Movement of Lithuania (Lith. *Lietuvos Persitvarkymo Sąjūdis*), was a political organisation created to implement the principles of Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika* and later led the struggle for Lithuanian independence in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The Sąjūdis initiative group consisted of the most prominent Lithuanian intellectuals and cultural figures of the time. However, it also included quite a few members of the Lithuanian Communist Party, as well as several identified KGB agents. After regaining independence, Sąjūdis continued to exist formally, but it lost its social influence and authority; its members joined various newly formed political parties.

remains controversial and paradoxical despite the early establishment of an anti-Soviet narrative during the national revival years and its consistency to this day. However, one component of de-Sovietisation – lustration – remains unfinished and continues to cause political problems. The second issue is increasingly being challenged by a trend stemming from the uncritical adoption of European historical politics principles (the so-called Nuremberg Consensus). These principles call for reinterpretation of national history according to European values, which, especially when it comes to the events of World War II and the postwar period, often leads to conflicts and memory wars<sup>7</sup>. This trend fundamentally questions the grand national historical narrative that took shape after 1990, replacing it in public, political, and academic discourse with new ideological postulates, self-censorship, and taboo topics. The third area of memory conflicts relates to the political exploitation of the origins of independence - the history of the Lithuanian national movement, Sajūdis - and the symbolic capital of its most notable figures in contemporary politics. All three themes are closely intertwined and, although deeply entrenched, remain at the centre of public and political elite attention. This became particularly evident during the 2024 presidential and parliamentary election debates.

# Is De-Sovietisation Possible without Lustration? The Problem of Collaboration with the Soviet Regime

From 1990 to 2025, Lithuanian historical politics underwent an evolution. This process was linked to a search for solutions to domestic and foreign challenges, as well as to the emergence of legal, administrative, and institutional

Rasa Čepaitienė, "Genocides in the European Politics of History", Genocidas ir rezistencija, no. 2(56) (2024): 140–62.

regulatory frameworks in this sphere. The following main tendencies can be identified:

- 1. The search for legitimacy of the newly established state (1990–2000). After the restoration of independence on 11 March 1990, public discourse centred on the connection to the First Republic of Lithuania (1918–40), as well as on the armed resistance and Stalinist repression of the mid-20th century. This strengthened the new state's legal and moral legitimacy and established the anti-Soviet political narrative of the right wing as dominant.
- 2. The "return to Europe" (2000–09). During the 2000s, the politics of history was clearly oriented towards the West. It sought historical narratives, personalities, and events that proved the medieval Lithuanian state had always been part of Western Catholic civilisation. This was particularly evident in the messages conveyed during the celebrations of the 750th anniversary of King Mindaugas's coronation in 2003 and the Millennium of Lithuania in 2009. By contrast, the influence of Byzantine culture and heritage, if recognised at all, was considered significantly less important.
- 3. Adoption of the European model of history (2004–19). Public discourse on the Holocaust remained weak until around 2010. However, the topic began to gain ground following President Algirdas Brazauskas's apology in the Knesset in 1995, historical research, and commemorative events. As a result, memory of the Holocaust gradually became established at the state level as one of the most important components of historical memory. This challenged the national narrative of the nation's suffering and struggles. During this time, memory wars intensified amid disputes between historians and politicians regarding the June 1941 uprising and the involvement of certain Lithuanian freedom fighters in the Holocaust. Russia deliberately fuelled these discussions in an attempt to portray Lithuania as a pro-Nazi state.

4. Impact of the war in Ukraine on memory politics (2014–25). Since the 2014 crisis in Ukraine, and especially after the Russian invasion in 2022, memory politics has increasingly become an integral part of Lithuania's national security discourse. Differences in the assessment of the Soviet period have sharpened, and "second" and "third" waves of removal of Soviet memorial symbols have taken place. At the same time, exploitation and manipulation of politically sensitive historical issues for current political agendas has increased.

It is worth noting that at the beginning of independence, emerging political parties often defined their group identity in relation to the recent past. Representatives of right-wing parties sought to immediately distance themselves from the Soviet legacy by denying any value it might have had. This radical stance can be linked to the phenomenon of alienation observed in studies of historical consciousness8. At the same time, these political forces sought to identify with aspects of the past, reflecting a proximity to history. The relationship between right-wing parties, their supporters, and the past was fundamentally based on collective traumas and grievances from the years of Soviet and Nazi occupations, along with demands for historical justice. To this end, some organisations of Soviet deportees and political prisoners were incorporated into the largest "right-wing" party, the HU-LCD. In contrast, among the left, the dimensions of alienation and proximity to history seemed to have been reversed<sup>9</sup>. Consequently, their ideological positions were primarily shaped by reinterpreting the activities of the Lithuanian Communist Party (LCP) during the Soviet period

Jörn Rüsen, "Historical Consciousness: Narrative Structure, Moral Function, and Ontogenetic Development", in *Theorizing Historical Consciousness*, ed. Peter Seixas (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 63–85.

Rasa Čepaitienė, "Lietuvių istorinės sąmonės tyrimų perspektyvos: ideologinis problemos lygmuo", *Politologija*, no. 3(35) (2004): 84–100.

in a favourable light. For this purpose, the slogan "and then we worked for Lithuania" was coined and adopted, serving as both a justification and a deflection of responsibility for collaboration with foreign powers. This phrase — also the title of the memoirs of Algirdas Brazauskas, the last first secretary of the LCP and later president and prime minister of independent Lithuania — became emblematic of this reinterpretation of an inconvenient past. For these reasons, members of LSDP avoid direct involvement in historical disputes. This creates the image of a pragmatic and reliable political force that focuses mainly on economic issues.

Russia's full-scale military invasion of Ukraine has made the Soviet era a relevant and sensitive topic once again in the countries of the region. Their media and public discourse often link Soviet policies with Vladimir Putin's regime's ideology and views towards its neighbours. Current Russian ideologues refer to this as the "great power's right to pursue its own interests". Since the early 1990s, following the terminology used by then Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev, this view of neighbouring countries has been framed as the "near abroad" (ближнее зарубежье) and is considered by Putin's administration to represent a legitimate sphere of influence<sup>10</sup>. However, the main difference between the Soviet and Putin regimes is that the former brought a communist project that transcended its national interests to neighbouring nations of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR)<sup>11</sup>; in contrast, the current "Russian world" ideology is not universal and is based on the chauvinistic "right" of one nation to impose its imperial rule on others<sup>12</sup>. This

Gerard Toal, Near Abroad: Putin, the West and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

Simon Gerhard, Nationalism and Policy Toward the Nationalities in the Soviet Union: From Totalitarian Dictatorship to Post-Stalinist Society (London; New York: Routledge, 2018).

Marlene Laruelle, The "Russian World": Russia's Soft Power and Geopolitical Imagination (Washington: Center on Global Interests, May 2015).

concept was also justified by Russian ideologues in the Tsarist era on historical grounds. The problem is that in some post-Soviet countries, the process of de-Sovietisation and decolonisation inevitably encounters a phenomenon that postcolonial states have already experienced: the *hybridity* and *marginality* of their cultures. This is the inability to distinguish the national cultural forms that emerged during the Soviet era from those imposed by the colonisers. At the same time, it is difficult to harmoniously divide them into separate parts, retaining the national and rejecting the foreign, invasive elements<sup>13</sup>.

In this respect, Lithuania constitutes an exceptional and paradoxical case. Although events in Ukraine, beginning with the "Revolution of Dignity", are closely followed in Lithuania, and although discussions regarding the "second" and "third" waves of de-Sovietisation of public spaces remain ongoing<sup>14</sup>, neither intellectual circles nor the media, with rare exceptions, employ the concepts of "decolonisation" or "internal decolonisation". On the contrary, certain Lithuanian intellectuals explicitly reject or even ridicule these terms as "fashionable yet empty and inapplicable", borrowed from Western academic discourse. This rejection partly stems from the fact that Lithuania did not have to undergo the "separating Siamese twins" operation that Ukraine and Belarus (at least among the intellectuals opposing the regime) are currently experiencing as they seek to distance themselves from Russia's civilisational influence. While the Soviet invasion of 1940 and the return of

Rasa Čepaitienė, Postsovietinis tranzitas: nuo Sovietų Sąjungos žlugimo iki karo Ukrainoje: atmintis, paveldas, tapatumas buvusioje SSRS (Kaunas: Obuolys, 2022), 302.

Rasa Čepaitienė, "'Leninopad's' Echoes: Changing Approaches to the Soviet Monuments in Lithuania (2014–2022)", Communist/Soviet Historical and Cultural Heritage of Eastern Europe in the 21st Century. Collection of Articles Based on Materials of Round Tables (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Belarus; Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, 2022), 96–108.

the Soviets to Lithuania after the war were described by contemporaries as colonisation - for instance, this term frequently appears in the diaries and memoirs of anti-Soviet resistance fighters - the ideological foundations of Lithuania's statehood, like those of the other Baltic republics, rest on a different paradigm: that of occupation, not colonisation. Lithuania's distinctiveness lies in its deep tradition of statehood, its non-Slavic language and culture, its use of the Latin alphabet, literacy dating back to the 16th century, and its Catholic faith. These elements, combined with the country's relatively late incorporation into the Soviet project, provided it with significant cultural and political resources to preserve its identity despite forced and total Sovietisation and Russification. However, the Soviet era also brought severe socioeconomic losses and psychological shifts, the full impact of which has yet to be assessed. The fundamental direction of Lithuania's politics of history is determined not solely by its relationship with Soviet totalitarianism or with the First Republic of Lithuania, but also by such factors as the need to adapt to the European model of memory and efforts to maintain the nation state in the face of globalisation and neoliberalism.

As in other Baltic states<sup>15</sup>, the first decade of Lithuania's post-Soviet history was characterised by a radical rethinking of the Soviet past. This reinterpretation was manifested through active public and intellectual discussions about the totalitarian nature of the USSR, crimes committed by communists, and the rehabilitation of their victims. There were also debates about the restitution of property confiscated by the occupying authorities from religious and ethnic communities. Ultimately, this led to ambiguous results,

See Marek Tamm, "In search of lost time: memory politics in Estonia, 1991–2011", Nationalities Papers 41, no. 4 (2013): 651–74; Mārtiņš Kaprāns, Remembering Communism in Latvia: Nationalizing State and the Multidirectionality of the Past", in The New Heroes – the Old Victims: Politics of Memory in Russia and the Baltics, ed. Igors Gubenko, Deniss Hanovs, and Vladislavs Malahovskis (Riga: Zinātne, 2016), 74–107.

particularly regarding the strange and unfinished process of lustration. Taking advantage of the chaos of the transition period, the Committee for State Security (KGB) files in Vilnius were transported to Russia. It is believed that some ended up in the personal archives of influential politicians so they could be used later to discredit opponents or for political blackmail. The Supreme Council - Reconstituent Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania established a temporary commission, which operated from 1991 to 1992, that required former KGB collaborators to confess. However, the commission had no rules of procedure, and the documents it adopted were not made public. Their whereabouts remain unknown to this day. Some commission members leaked information to the press about collaboration with the KGB by individuals who needed to be removed from political competition under the heading "Voratinklis" (Spider's Web).

Lithuania did not pass laws prohibiting former KGB agents and individuals associated with pro-Soviet organisations from participating in national elections and accessing state secrets until the mid-1990s. In 1998, Lithuania adopted the law "On the Assessment of the USSR State Security Committee (NKVD, NKGB, MGB, KGB) and the Current Activities of the Staff Members of This Organisation". The following year, the law "On Registering, Confession, Entry into Records and Protection of Persons Who Have Admitted to Secret Collaboration with Special Services of the Former USSR" (commonly known as the "Lustration Law") was enacted. Under its provisions, the list of KGB collaborators was classified for 15 years, allegedly due to a promise made by the state to those who confessed. The legislation also expanded the list of prohibitions on the employment of former KGB collaborators who had not confessed to include schools, banks, and private security services – apparently to calm public discontent. However, this legal act, which was subsequently amended and revised several times, did not specify all categories of persons who had collaborated with the KGB, nor did it establish different levels of responsibility for these individuals. These gaps generated political problems that persist to this day. Although Lithuania preserved the majority of the KGB archives, a significant portion of the most important documents – such as correspondence between the KGB and the Lithuanian Communist Party and files on secret collaborators - were destroyed, removed, or went missing during the transition period. As a result, it became impossible to determine the exact number of people who collaborated with the repressive structures or the extent of their responsibility. On 30 June 2015, fifteen years after the expiration of the classification period, the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania added fuel to the fire of these disputes by adopting an amendment to the law allowing information and data submitted by registered, confessed, and listed individuals to remain secret for an additional 75 years.

Critics believe that these vetting measures, which will keep the identities of representatives of the repressive occupation regime concealed for 90 years, not only mock the memory of their victims but also undermine the foundations of statehood. Notably, Lithuania is the only Baltic country that has not completed the lustration process<sup>16</sup>. As long as the identities of individuals active in politics and business after independence who evaded responsibility for persecuting or denouncing their fellow citizens remain undisclosed, they continue to pose a potential risk as agents of Russian influence. Such a situation undermines citizens' fundamental trust in their state and its political leadership. This uncertainty is exacerbated by constant mudslinging and a pervasive tendency to automatically label political opponents and public critics as "working for Russia", a phenomenon that intensified significantly in 2022 with the start of the war in Ukraine. Despite initiatives in the

Monika Nalepa, Skeletons in the Closet. Transitional Justice in Post-Communist Europe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 200–2.

Seimas to amend or repeal the lustration law and declassify the names of former KGB collaborators, none have been successful. Paradoxically, the HU-LCD, a party that positions itself as "the most patriotic political power", has been particularly opposed to efforts to reveal the names of secret collaborators. Founded by Landsbergis – widely regarded as the "architect of independence" and the "patriarch of the nation" – the party's resistance raises questions in light of archival evidence linking Landsbergis himself to the KGB<sup>17</sup>.

In response to growing geopolitical threats and tensions in the region, and partly due to Ukraine's decommunisation laws<sup>18</sup>, the Seimas adopted the law "On the Prohibition of Promotion of Totalitarian, Authoritarian Regimes and Their Ideologies" (also known as the "De-Sovietisation Law") on 13 December 2022. Representatives of the hardline wing of the HU-LCD initiated and drafted this legislation, which was mainly directed against the symbols of Soviet propaganda and ideology that remained physically present in the public sphere. To implement the law, the Seimas requested the establishment of an inter-institutional commission consisting of nine members at the Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania. Both the title and content of the law immediately provoked sharp controversy. Critics questioned whether inanimate objects, such as monuments, sculptures, obelisks, memorial plaques, street names, and the like, could actually "promote" anything, particularly as only a few such symbols remained. Further confusion arose because some relics of the Soviet symbolic

For example, the KGB's file on his foreign travels has recently been made public. Though a third of the pages are missing, the remaining pages allow us to reconstruct the frequency and intensity of this ordinary musicologist's travels around the world – a feat that was unimaginable for most of his colleagues.

Евгения Лёзина, XX век: проработка прошлого. Практики переходного правосудия и политика памяти в бывших диктатурах. Германия, Россия, страны Центральной и Восточной Европы (Москва: НЛО, 2021), 546–76.

landscape were already protected by the state as cultural artefacts, leaving uncertainty about the law's scope and enforcement. This ambiguity led some local municipalities to openly sabotage the commission's decisions. Senior government officials criticised the commission for its inconsistency and for what was perceived as stirring up public unrest. Unable to withstand these accusations, the commission resigned en masse in June 2025. It is possible that the implementation of the law may ultimately be left to the discretion of local authorities.

Whether the law's creators planned this in advance remains unclear, but the legislation mainly targeted places and objects commemorating Lithuanian writers and poets elevated to the pantheon of Soviet Lithuanian cultural greats, especially those with significant ties to the Soviet regime. The most prominent example was the famous Lithuanian poet Salomėja Nėris (1904–1945). She was part of the delegation that went to Moscow in 1940 to bring the "Stalin Sun" to Lithuania, and her memory is now being erased from public spaces. The decisions to remove monuments and memorial plagues dedicated to Neris and other figures of Lithuanian culture, along with efforts to rename streets, have provoked protests from literary scholars, writers, and admirers of their work. They argue that some of these individuals later repented for their naivety at the time, and that there is no solid evidence of their collaboration with Soviet repressive structures in committing crimes.

While society was inclined to forgive these writers and poets for their political missteps during the Stalinist era, some politicians demonstrated uncompromising severity towards them. Today, this attitude is directed at many talented artists from the Soviet era who, in one way or another, were involved in legitimising the regime or created ideologically motivated works. Justinas Marcinkevičius (1930–2011), the most famous Lithuanian poet of the Soviet era, is a notable example. After writing several poems glorifying the Soviets in his youth, he devoted his adult life to defending

the Lithuanian language and fostering Lithuanian historical consciousness. At the beginning of the Sajūdis movement, the poet sacrificed his enormous moral authority for the sake of defending national interests. He became a member of the Sajūdis initiative group, which was still quite risky at the time, and encouraged other intellectuals to join this movement. Marcinkevičius also wrote the Preamble to the Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania, which was adopted in 1992. There were even plans to elect him president, but he withdrew from politics after what appeared to be a smear campaign organised, it is believed, by his political rivals. Although Marcinkevičius died in 2011, intellectual circles within the HU-LCD still make great efforts to downplay his national significance, preventing the erection of a monument in Vilnius in his honour and any wider commemoration. However, this has spurred his supporters into action. Private funds are being collected for Marcinkevičius monuments, and events dedicated to his work are held that attract crowds of listeners longing for good poetry.

In 2024, HU-LCD representatives in the Seimas submitted a draft law to evaluate the activities of the Lithuanian Communist Party, recognising it as an organisation responsible for repressions and deportations committed during the Stalinist period. The proposed law would have mandated presidential candidates to disclose their membership of the LCP. Additionally, members of the Seimas, the European Parliament, municipal councils, and mayors, as well as candidates for diplomatic and civil service positions, would also have been required to provide this information. Those who concealed this information in their biographies would not have been appointed to the desired positions. The law would also have established the LCP's responsibility for genocide against Lithuanian citizens, mass repression, terror, punitive actions, deportations, killing of freedom fighters and civilians, forced Sovietisation and collectivisation, the spread of atheism, censorship, destruction of cultural

and religious monuments, and other violations of fundamental human rights and freedoms.

Notably, the Seimas had already addressed this issue, in 2017, by adopting a resolution assessing the criminal activities of the Lithuanian Communist Party and urging the government to draft a law recognising it as a criminal organisation. The renewed focus on this matter in 2024, initiated by HU-LCD politicians, was clearly linked to documents published in 2023. They revealed that President Gitanas Nausėda, in late May 1988 - just before the establishment of Sajūdis on 3 June, when expectations for liberation were circulating - applied to join the LCP. He did so for career reasons and concealed this fact during his presidential election campaign in 2019<sup>19</sup>. The personal animosity between Prime Minister Ingrida Šimonytė, the ruling coalition she represented, and the president was an open secret. Thus, the publication of these facts by a journalist linked to the HU-LCD seemed intended to insult the head of state, who often associated himself with Saiūdis in public speeches. Apparently in response, in 2024 the media revealed that several influential business and public figures connected to the HU-LCD, including the well-known historian and media figure Prof. Alfredas Bumblauskas, had joined the LCP shortly before independence and later concealed this fact. This clearly shows that Lithuania's political, business, and cultural elite still have numerous skeletons in their closets. Similarly, information about uncomfortable episodes in President Dalia Grybauskaitė's past remained concealed from the public until 2012. Grybauskaitė, who served as head of state from 2009 to 2019 and was supported by both camps - the "right" HU-LCD and the "left" LSDP – had previously held the position of scientific secretary at the Vilnius Higher Party School and belonged to the

In general, all of Lithuania's post-Soviet presidents, except for Valdas Adamkus, belonged to the Communist Party.

camp opposing Lithuanian independence during the period of Sąjūdis. Journalist Rūta Janutienė uncovered these facts and planned to broadcast them on TV in November 2012; however, the programme was not allowed to air. It was made available online and presented archival documents, with the president being posed uncomfortable questions about her position during the Soviet aggression against the re-emerging state from 1990 to 1991. Janutienė subsequently lost her job at the television station and later wrote a book *Raudonoji Dalia* ("Red Dalia", 2013), which revealed more facts about the president's past that had been hidden or altered. Despite these investigative efforts, the issue attracted little attention from both the mainstream media and the political elite.

The persistent unwillingness of certain political forces to disclose the names of those who secretly collaborated with the KGB, while simultaneously attempting to compromise high-ranking political opponents belonging to the LCP, indicates a highly selective and clearly double-standard approach. This pattern leaves the door open to further compromising of political opponents and the empty pursuit of sensationalism.

# **Attempts to Rewrite History**

Revelations of inconvenient episodes from the pasts of politicians in high office – or their stubborn refusal to acknowledge them – as well as their tendency to quietly revise their official biographies reveal an attempt to rewrite the history of the Soviet period and the beginnings of the Second Republic of Lithuania. Perhaps the most consistent and determined in these efforts are those of the politicians of the HU-LCD, who strive to attribute credit for regaining independence to their founder and first chairman, Prof. Landsbergis, and themselves. This is often achieved by ignoring, marginalising, or discrediting other significant figures in the Sąjūdis movement. Despite the consistent

narrative in history textbooks, documentaries, and television programmes that Landsbergis almost single-handedly restored Lithuania's independence and even destroyed the Soviet Union, little is known about his anti-Soviet activities before the founding of Sąjūdis, even though he personally associates himself with resistance to the Soviet regime. In reality, he was a well-established figure within the Lithuanian cultural elite who travelled abroad frequently during the Soviet era and enjoyed the privileges of the *nomenklatura* of the time.

It is worth noting that the leadership of Sajūdis and the decisions it made were collective. At the founding congress of Sajūdis on 22-23 October 1988, when the participants were selecting the movement's leaders, philosopher Romualdas Ozolas received the most votes. Landsbergis came in third, surpassed by economics professor Kazimiera Prunskienė, who later became the head of the first government. During her tenure, Prunskienė was warmly received by foreign leaders, and the media dubbed her the "Amber Lady". Both Ozolas and Prunskienė were subsequently discredited and removed from politics. Ozolas faced allegations of financial misconduct, although the charges were later dropped. Prunskienė was accused of being a former KGB agent, codenamed "Šatrijos Ragana" (Witch of Šatrija), who allegedly caused economic turmoil in early 1991. Other leaders of Sajūdis soon faced attempts to erase their memory from recent history as well, with their roles increasingly replaced by that of Landsbergis. His official biography has also been heavily sanitised of any unpleasant or questionable episodes. Despite his advanced age and the fact that he has long since ceased to hold any official position, Landsbergis remains an extremely influential informal political leader and an active participant in the public sphere. Like his entire dynasty<sup>20</sup>, he leaves no one indifferent: although he has a large group of admirers who have almost deified him, there are just as many, if not more, who openly hate him for his love of privilege, his tendency towards a personality cult<sup>21</sup> and nepotism, and his dismissive attitude toward opponents and the people. The party he founded has subjugated most of the media, public opinion shapers, and law enforcement, demonstrating a tendency to monopolise the truth and to adopt an elitist attitude towards society. Any criticism of Landsbergis or doubts about his exceptional achievements in regaining independence are seen by big media as anti-Lithuanian and as evidence that such critics are "working for Russia".

In 2022, the HU-LCD held a parliamentary majority and managed to pass a law granting Landsbergis, who served as chairman of the Supreme Council in 1990–92, the status of "head of state", equivalent to that of president, along with

His son, Vytautas V. Landsbergis, is a well-known filmmaker, and his grandson, Gabrielius, held the positions of member of the European Parliament, chairman of the HU-LCD party, and minister of foreign affairs in I. Šimonytė's government. However, Gabrielius Landsbergis's activities as minister were highly controversial. The media revealed that he and his wife, a well-known businesswoman who was believed to have gained a business advantage due to her affiliation with this influential family, purchased a luxurious villa on one of the Greek islands on the eve of the war in Ukraine, a fact they concealed from the public. This revelation significantly undermined the Landsbergis family's carefully crafted image as "the most patriotic" and forced Gabrielius to abandon his plans for a further political career. This cult's influence is particularly noticeable in the official Independence Day ritual, celebrated annually on 16 February. On that day, V. Landsbergis delivers a speech to the gathered crowd from the balcony of Signatories' House, the historic site where the Lithuanian Council signed the Act of Independence of Lithuania in 1918. However, efforts to appropriate major national symbols and spaces are not limited to this event. For instance, on 13 January, the Day of the Defenders of Freedom - commemorating the 1991 killing of 14 civilians by Soviet troops at the TV tower - the HU-LCD stubbornly tries to introduce a new symbol: the forget-me-not. Originally intended as a civic symbol of remembrance, it has increasingly been perceived as sparking social conflict, since part of society continues to reject it as divisive and as falsifying a past that many still remember well.

corresponding privileges. Previous attempts to confer this status on Landsbergis had been rejected several times by the Constitutional Court, which ruled that the designation applied exclusively to the president of the state. Landsbergis had never held this position, although he did run for the presidency of the Republic of Lithuania in 1997. However, with only 15.9% of the vote, he failed to advance to the second round. Disputes on this issue continued into early 2025, when a new parliament launched an unsuccessful initiative to strip Landsbergis of the title head of state, arguing that it was illegal.

Overall, HU-LCD politicians have attempted several times to rewrite history using legal means and procedural mechanisms. For instance, in 1996, the Supreme Council of the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic – whose deputies first declared the restoration of Lithuania's independence on 11 March 1990 – was renamed the Reconstituent Seimas. In 2009, the Seimas recognised Jonas Žemaitis-Vytautas, the leader of the anti-Soviet partisans, as the head of state who fought against the occupation and effectively served as president from 1949 to 1954. During the centenary celebrations of modern Lithuania in 2018 and the 100th anniversary of Adolfas Ramanauskas-Vanagas's<sup>22</sup> birth, the Seimas

Adolfas Ramanauskas-Vanagas (1918-1957) was a Lithuanian anti-Soviet partisan commander and brigadier general. In 1945, he joined the partisans. On 16 February 1949, he participated in the congress of partisans from across Lithuania, which adopted the Declaration of the Movement for the Struggle for Freedom of Lithuania (MSFL). The same year, Ramanauskas-Vanagas was appointed the commander of the MSFL Defence Force and deputy to Jonas Žemaitis-Vytautas, chairman of the Presidium of the Council of the MSFL. He was awarded the First-Degree Order of the Cross of the Freedom Fights. In 1951, when Jonas Žemaitis fell seriously ill, Ramanauskas-Vanagas assumed his duties as chairman of the Presidium of the Council of the MSFL. From the end of 1952, after the communication with the high command broke down, he lived in deep hiding with his family. He was arrested in 1956 and brutally tortured. Ramanauskas-Vanagas was shot on 29 November 1957 and secretly buried in Našlaičių (Orphans) Cemetery in Vilnius. His remains were found, identified, and ceremoniously reburied in Antakalnis Cemetery in Vilnius in 2018.

adopted a resolution recognising him posthumously as the head of state of postwar Lithuania. These legal precedents apparently paved the way for Landsbergis's questionable confirmation as "head of state".

## The Political Exploitation of Collaboration with the Nazis

The October 2024 Lithuanian parliamentary elections brought other political forces into the ruling coalition, including the Social Democrats and two relatively new "leftwing" parties. It was evident that the former parliamentary majority - consisting of the influential political, financial, and intellectual elites, along with their supporters - could not accept losing power. They sought to challenge the election results by using certain historical themes, among other things. This time, the pretext for their attack was a series of controversial Facebook posts made in 2023 by Dawn of Nemunas party leader Remigijus Žemaitaitis, in which he criticised Israel's policy towards Palestinian civilians. The posts were deemed "anti-Semitic", and the politician was labelled a "repulsive anti-Semite" who should be removed from parliament. In April 2024, the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Lithuania ruled that Žemaitaitis's public statements on social media were contrary to the Constitution. Following this decision, he resigned from his position in the Seimas to avoid impeachment and to remain eligible to run for office. Analysing which statements earned Žemaitaitis the label of "anti-Semite", one could argue that they were emotional posts that were difficult to understand when taken out of context. The politician subsequently deleted them and apologised. However, his opponents were offended not only by his criticism of Israel but also by a controversial quote from a children's song that, while anti-Semitic and distasteful, is also a well-known element of Lithuanian folklore. As a result, Žemaitaitis was publicly condemned for both criticising current Israeli policy and for quoting

politically incorrect folklore. The controversy sparked a prolonged scandal, which nevertheless helped Dawn of Nemunas secure second place in the 2024 parliamentary elections.

Several well-known historians and other experts who testified before the Constitutional Court claimed that the Dawn of Nemunas's tendency towards fascism is demonstrated even by the colour of its members' T-shirts and the word "dawn", which appears in the names of several European fascist parties and movements. However, these arguments are considered far-fetched and weak because nothing anti-Semitic or fascist has been noted in the party's programme or public statements. When Dawn of Nemunas joined the newly formed ruling coalition, President Nausėda stated that he would not allow any of its members to be appointed as ministers. By doing so, he applied the presumption of collective guilt and, according to some political commentators, violated democratic rules and the Constitution.

The "terrible rise" of anti-Semitism in Lithuania was widely publicised around the world. To this end, Žemaitaitis's opponents, mainly from the former ruling parties, used their international connections and control of the mainstream media. Three protest rallies were held against the formation of the government. The protesters demanded the removal of Dawn of Nemunas from the ruling coalition, accusing the political force of tarnishing Lithuania's global reputation. In response to relentless and exaggerated accusations of anti-Semitism and a massive media attack, Žemaitaitis became bolder. He even began drawing parallels between Lithuanian citizens of Jewish ethnicity who collaborated with the Soviet authorities in Lithuania from 1940 to 1941 and who were directly or indirectly involved in repressive Soviet structures after the war. The politician claimed that the current head of the Lithuanian Jewish Community (LJC), Faina Kukliansky, represented the law enforcement institutions during the Soviet era - first as a criminal investigator and then as a prosecutor. She is currently engaged in lobbying activities mainly related to granting Lithuanian citizenship to Litvaks (Lithuanian Jews) from around the world whose ancestors emigrated from the country in different periods, and she facilitated the granting of Lithuanian citizenship to the children of sanctioned Russian oligarch Roman Abramovich. This highly influential woman has been awarded several high state honours for her "services to Lithuania", which provoked considerable controversy because she frequently resorts to anti-Lithuanian rhetoric and accuses her opponents of anti-Semitism. Furthermore, Kukliansky has alleged that several prominent members of the Lithuanian anti-Soviet resistance, including Adolfas Ramanauskas-Vanagas, Juozas Lukša-Daumantas, and other "forest brothers", organised or participated in the massacre of local Jews during World War II. However, these accusations, which the Kremlin has been eager to repeat, have been refuted by historians<sup>23</sup>.

Despite opposition from the entire state elite and their supporters, who sought to remove Žemaitaitis from the political arena, he gained unflagging popularity among the so-called "common people". This support was largely fuelled by his willingness to address politically sensitive topics. He broke a taboo by speaking about the collaboration of some Lithuanian Jews with the Soviet authorities during Stalinist repressions (considered "anti-Semitic statements" and attracted significant media and public attention by promising to expose secret KGB agents. However, opponents were likely most offended by Žemaitaitis's public commitment to auditing the financial activities and content of institutions associated with these political forces, such as the national broadcaster LRT. This may be the real reason behind the

Rasa Čepaitienė, "Controversies of the Memory of the Second World War in Lithuania: Between Cosmopolitan and Nationalist Approaches", Wojna i Pamieć, no. 5 (2023): 43–68.

There were several cases where professional historians faced severe repercussions, including job losses, simply for trying to write or speak publicly about the controversies of the Jewish-Lithuanian relationship during World War II.

"terrible" anti-Semitism in Lithuania. Another question is why a large part of society did not believe the accusations levelled against Žemaitaitis and his party; instead, they supported the Dawn of Nemunas party. Perhaps it is because they hoped to find a real opposition to the established political system, which divides society into an "elite" and the "underprivileged", whom propaganda disparages. This part of society also opposes the official politics of history that acknowledges the Lithuanian nation as a collective perpetrator of the Holocaust. This policy obliges the Lithuanian nation to constantly repent and pay compensation to the Jewish community, which has already been done twice<sup>25</sup>. Therefore, there is a certain asymmetry of resentment in this situation: some people's grievances, fears, and complaints are exaggerated, while others' are silenced or ignored as if they were completely insignificant. By taking control of this uncomfortable discourse, Žemaitaitis presented himself as a defender of Lithuania's dignity and historical truth who is targeted by the corrupt elite. This conflict revealed that the boundaries of what could be said about history, established over several decades, had finally been crossed.

#### **Conclusions**

Analysing the politics of history in Lithuania suggests that internal imperatives – such as a search for state legitimacy and the need for European integration – initially determined

In 1995, during a visit to the Knesset in Israel, Lithuanian President Algirdas Brazauskas publicly apologised to the Jews for Lithuanians who participated in the Holocaust. Following this, a commission was established to assess losses suffered by the Jewish community during World War II. Financial compensation was calculated and paid to the LJC. In 2023, however, Ingrida Šimonytė's government once again paid the LJC a similar sum of several million euros. Additionally, the government transferred the Sports and Culture Palace – a building of great historical and architectural value to Lithuania – to the future Jewish Museum. These important decisions were made without public discussion or notification, causing outrage.

historical discourse but are now increasingly overshadowed by external pressures. These include conforming to international norms (for example, the *Nuremberg Consensus*) and responding to de-Sovietising impulses catalysed by the Russo–Ukrainian War. Accompanying this shift is a weakening of national identity and the increasing dominance of one party (HU-LCD) and a liberal centre-right ideological mainstream in shaping the political agenda.

The "occupation paradigm", established early in Lithuania's official memory discourse, cast collective identity in terms of victims and heroes, emphasising suffering and resistance. However, this paradigm also allowed segments of society to evade culpability for collaboration under the Nazi and Soviet regimes, leaving many difficult historical questions largely unaddressed. The passage of the De-Sovietisation Law in December 2022 sought to remove symbols of totalitarian regimes from public space. Although many Soviet ideological and propagandistic symbols and signs had already been removed in the 1990s, implementation of the law has focused more heavily on relics honouring cultural figures associated with the Soviet era. This shift indicates a move from the "occupation paradigm" towards what might be called a "collaboration paradigm", redirecting attention from foreign perpetrators and national heroes to local agents of Sovietisation. Such reorientation has expanded the notion of collaboration to encompass post-Stalinist creative figures whose work aligned with Soviet ideological demands.

Paradoxically, despite Lithuania's long-standing and forceful anti-Soviet narrative – reinforced since the onset of the war in Ukraine – it remains the only Baltic state that has not completed the lustration process. This has fostered suspicion, speculation, and frequent accusations against political opponents, and has contributed to social polarisation. Significantly, parties that have portrayed themselves publicly as "defenders of national interests" have resisted exposing secret KGB agents, even when conditions might permit it. The absence of transparent mechanisms and legal

instruments to address these unresolved historical issues raises serious concerns about external influence and the integrity of public discourse – especially within the context of national security.

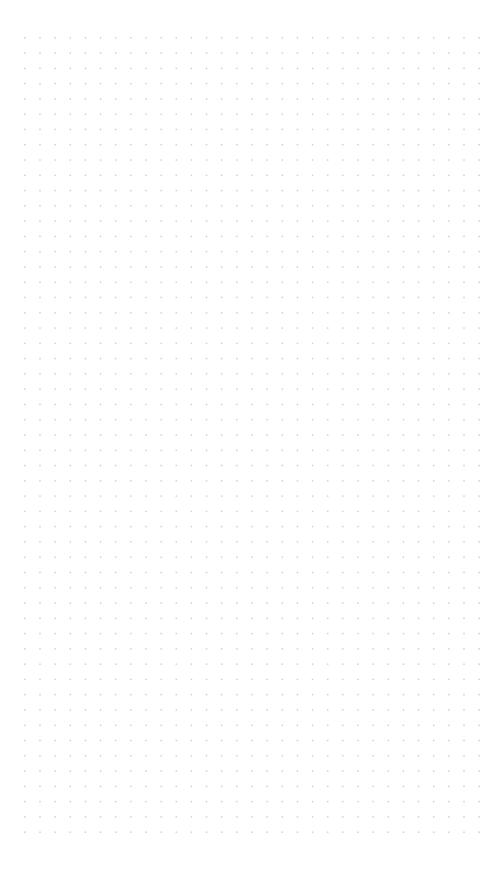
Institutional, financial, and cultural capital has increasingly coalesced around HU-LCD and its satellite parties. Drawing on Gramscian notions of hegemony<sup>26</sup>, one sees how cultural discourse (media, public intellectuals, artistic circles) has tended to converge around a dominant worldview, marginalising alternative voices. Opposition parties and movements are frequently delegitimised - framed as populist, morally corrupt, or "working for Russia" - rather than engaged with substantively. In line with theories of imitative democracy<sup>27</sup>, formal democratic structures – such as elections, parliament, and a free press – are preserved, vet they serve primarily to stabilise power instead of facilitating representative governance. The evidence suggests that while elections are predictable and the media show bias, opposition groups are stigmatised or sidelined. Power is maintained not so much by overt force or legal revocation, but through concentration of authority, control over public narratives, and the selective application of justice.

In Lithuania, developments consistent with the concept of imitative democracy, as discussed in post-communist regime analysis, can be observed. These manifest in the attempts of political actors to assert control over the interpretation of truth – particularly by privileging some historical narratives while devaluing others – thereby linking struggles over memory to the institutional dynamics of political competition. Increasing polarisation around

Antonio Gramsci, Selections from the Prison Notebooks, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Wolfgang Merkel, "Embedded and Defective Democracies", Democratization 11, no. 5 (2004): 33–58.

historically sensitive topics – such as secret KGB agents, the Holocaust, and involvement in the consolidation and support of the Soviet regime – has rendered rational compromise or reconciliatory debate progressively difficult. Political actors seeking to consolidate popularity exploit the public's legitimate demands for truth and justice. Meanwhile, historical memory remains inconsistent, contradictory, and manipulable: certain narratives and figures are emphasised, while others are ignored. At a time when war and geopolitical tension make the stakes higher, the lack of truthful reflection on the past and the absence of a coherent vision for the future are particularly risky.



## Chapter 2

## HISTORY AS MILITARISTIC RHETORIC: HISTORICAL POLITICS IN BELARUS AFTER 2022

Aliaksei Lastouski

## Introduction

During the political protests of 2020, when Aliaksandr Lukashenka's power in Belarus was seriously challenged for the first time, it became clear that the previous model of the social contract, based on the apoliticality of Belarusian citizens, no longer worked. It was necessary to look for a new model of political mobilisation that could strengthen the legitimacy of the authorities and discredit political opponents. Then, unexpectedly for external observers, the Belarusian authorities began to use history intensively to transform the state identity project. This effort found reflection in the symbolic designation of time: 2021 as the Year of National Unity and 2022 as the Year of Historical Memory. On the one hand, the familiar resource of Victory in the Great Patriotic War was employed where, in the state mythology, the Belarusian authorities appeared as the main custodian of the memory of the great victory over fascism. However, on the other hand, the associated set of ideas about Belarusians as victims of the Nazi occupation politics underwent significant changes. Back in the 1970s,

the Belarusian communist authorities established the formula "every fourth", referring to the enormous human losses during the war. However, even these estimates turned out to be insufficient for inclusion in the Eastern European "genocide race", where each nation seeks to portray itself as a victim of inhumane occupation regimes. The Lukashenka regime, using references to the positive experience of the Soviet past, unlike its neighbours, cannot present itself as a victim of two hostile regimes – Stalin's and Hitler's, but the assessment of the trauma inflicted by the Nazi occupation can change significantly.

Indeed, Belarus was devastated by the war<sup>1</sup>. This tragedy is now being instrumentalised by the regime, which is pursuing a new historical memory to support the ideological concept of the "genocide of the Belarusian people" during the Great Patriotic War. The law "On the Genocide of the Belarusian People" was adopted swiftly: on 9 December 2021, a draft law was published, and on 5 January 2022, Lukashenka signed the law, after which it came into force.

The introduction of the discourse of genocide of the Belarusian people largely involved expert participation from the Russian side, where preparations for the recognition of the genocide of the Soviet people had begun much earlier. Many Russian experts and structures actively promoted and supported similar steps on the Belarusian side. But in general, the primary motivation for advancing the discourse of genocide was predominantly internal, due to the acute political crisis of 2020<sup>2</sup>.

This chapter examines the transformations of historical politics in Belarus after the start of full-scale Russian aggression in Ukraine in February 2022, which dramatically

See Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands. Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (London: Vintage, 2012).

Aliaksei Lastouski, "Recoding the Nation: Historical Politics in Belarus after the 2020 Protests", in Constructing Memory: Central and Eastern Europe in the New Geopolitical Reality, ed. Hanna Bazhenova (Lublin: IEŚ, 2022), 163–86.

altered the situation in the region. Bordering both Russia and Ukraine, Belarus was also compelled to make its choice. Lukashenka's regime, having relied on the Kremlin's support at a critical moment in 2020, found itself in a hopeless position, and a Russian military operation began to be carried out across the Belarus–Ukraine border. This was followed by the international isolation of Belarus as Russia's ally in an aggressive war, which inevitably impacted the country's domestic and foreign policies<sup>3</sup>.

It is also significant that the Russian authorities, and most notably Vladimir Putin, used historical arguments in their rhetoric justifying aggression: Ukraine was declared a failed nation that had appropriated, through historical accident, the original Russian lands<sup>4</sup>. This instrumentalisation of historical arguments in the Russian–Ukrainian confrontation adds an important external dimension to the internal development of the ideology of the Belarusian regime. As the social scientist Nelly Bekus pointed out, "The war ultimately revealed the limits of Belarus's sovereignty in current circumstances – and posed a serious threat to it."

As part of this study, the state media publications of Belarus in 2022–24 were monitored in order to check how historical arguments are used to shape the official political discourse and external positioning of Belarus as an ally of Russia in the aggressive war against Ukraine. Most publications on historical topics in the state media are tied to the main state holidays of the Republic of Belarus, such as Independence Day, Victory Day, and 22 June, the anniversary

Robert-Gabriel Ţicălău, "Belarusian Regime Perceptions of Russian Aggression in Ukraine", The Journal of Belarusian Studies 13(1) (2024): 30-47.

Vera Tolz and Stephen Hutchings, "Truth with a Z: disinformation, war in Ukraine, and Russia's contradictory discourse of imperial identity", Post-Soviet Affairs 39, no. 5 (2023): 347–65.

Nelly Bekus, "Reassembling Society in a Nation-State: History, Language, and Identity Discourses of Belarus", Nationalities Papers 51, no. 1 (2023): 98-113.

of the start of the Great Patriotic War. Since 2023, 22 June has been given a notable status – the Day of National Remembrance of the Victims of the Great Patriotic War and the Genocide of the Belarusian People. As the name suggests, this commemorative day is directly related to the new initiative to recognise the genocide of the Belarusian people and therefore acquires special significance.

### **Evolution of Historic Rhetoric**

When analysing the corpus of Belarusian state media publications on historical topics from 2022 to 2024, the following general trends can be identified:

## Curtailment of the Official Historical Narrative to the Period of the Great Patriotic War

Belarus, like every post-Soviet state, needs an integrative historical narrative that brings together medieval state formations, the Soviet period, and transformations during the period of independence into a single line of development. Naturally, the task of forming a single consistent narrative is quite difficult. In previous years (2018–22), pro-government historians put considerable effort into developing a new narrative of Belarusian history, which was encapsulated in the concept of the "history of Belarusian statehood". The main initiator and promoter of this concept was historian Ihar Marzaliuk, who skilfully used his political resources to form his own clans in the leading Belarusian universities. The synthetic narrative of the history of the Belarusian state published in 20226 presents a slightly modified version of national historiography, where the main emphasis is on the development of Belarusian statehood, which reaches its apogee in Lukashenka's Belarus. The key

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Ігар А. Марзалюк, агульная рэд., *Гісторыя беларускай дзяржаўнасці:* вучэбны дапаможнік для студэнтаў устаноў вышэйшай адукацыі (Мінск: Адукацыя і выхаванне, 2022).

distinction is that the struggle of the Belarusian nation for self-expression is replaced here by the glorification of state institutions (from the cult of the Grand Dukes to the leading role of the Communist Party). This concept obviously contradicts modern methodological approaches to historical science but was created with the explicit goal of further legitimising Lukashenka's regime. The textbook on the history of Belarusian statehood was urgently revised to include new trends: representation of the Nazi occupation policy as genocide of the Belarusian people, a sharp anti-Polish character of the narrative, and detailed accusations of Belarusians who collaborated with the Nazis. Unsurprisingly, the attempt to create a new common narrative had many controversial points, ranging from whether the Principality of Polotsk should be considered to have been independent of Kyivan Rus to whether the political protests of 2020 merited inclusion in this narrative.

This problematic narrative of Belarusian statehood is, however, practically absent from state media. The analysis shows that almost all publications on historical topics are confined to heroic deeds during the Great Patriotic War or to the victims of the genocide of the Belarusian people. A small exception is usually made for the period when Western Belarus was part of interwar Poland. However, even these publications in the annual commemorative cycle are chronologically tied to the Day of National Unity celebrated on 17 September<sup>7</sup> since 2021. At the same time, the Belarusian authorities aspire to have a full-fledged historical narrative of Belarusian statehood, but this ambition is not reflected in practice in the media. Although during 2021–22, when the current narrative was being formed, there were attempts

On 17 September 1939, Soviet troops entered Poland, which was repelling Nazi aggression, under the pretext of liberating Belarusian and Ukrainian territories. Later, during the Soviet period, this date was celebrated as the day of the reunification of the Belarusian and Ukrainian peoples.

to determine assessments of other historical periods, such efforts are no longer evident in the media sphere. This tendency can be called "avoidance of narrative", where intellectual resources are clearly insufficient to define the entire history of Belarus. Consequently, one bastion is chosen and fought for.

## **Archaeology Instead of History**

Almost the only activity of professional historians (we are talking about those affiliated with the Institute of History of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus, the Belarusian State University, etc.) that finds representation in the state media is new archaeological finds. In this regard, interest in archaeological activity has increased, with some research projects entering the sphere of state interests. For example, investigations on the settlement of Menka near Minsk was under the personal patronage of Prime Minister Raman Halouchanka. Undoubtedly, such an increase in the status of archaeology has been influenced by the fact that the director of the Institute of History of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus, Vadzim Lakiza, is a trained archaeologist. It seems that archaeology is perceived as a "harmless" activity that avoids the complexities of interpreting the national narrative. At the same time, these archaeological studies allow scholars to build a long genealogy of national statehood, adding symbolic resources when the very independence of the Belarusian state is in great question.

Emphasising the ancient roots of Belarusian statehood clearly complicates the standard picture of Belarus's deepening dependence on Russia. The Belarusian state is compelled to seek additional resources to return to a more comfortable position of balancing between Russia and the West, but its options in a wartime situation remain extremely limited.

#### **Bureaucratisation of the Historical Narrative**

Even more remarkable is that the wave of "appeals to historical memory", constant references to the fact that Belarusians

remember their history, in no way affects the presence of professional historians in state media. On the contrary, professional knowledge is perceived as unreliable, which can harm historical truth. The preferred custodian of memory for state media is a local historian or employee of a local museum who recounts the individual story of a war hero. This strategy makes it possible to avoid any use of critical methods or undesirable generalisations.

Meanwhile, the main role in maintaining the discourse of historical memory is taken by Belarusian officials. Some of them – such as Vadzim Gigin, Ihar Marzaliuk, Viachaslau Danilovich, and Aliaksandr Kavalenia – were engaged in professional historiography but have held official positions for a long time. In addition, some initiatives are led by bureaucratic structures. For instance, the Prosecutor General's Office is promoting the topic of the genocide of the Belarusian people, which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs joined in unsuccessful attempts to give it international resonance.

## Innovations in Historical Rhetoric: Struggle with the "Collective West"

Since 2023, one can observe some stagnation in state historical politics. After a period of active search for new forms in 2020–22, there has been ossification, endless repetition of the same formulations, and a kind of "ritualisation of memory".

Historical politics has now been almost completely reduced to the theme of the Great Patriotic War, and a decrease in the number of substantive publications on military topics in state media, which cover specific stories of "genocide". Even the Prosecutor General's Office of the Republic of Belarus, which acted as the main newsmaker on the topic of the Belarusian genocide, has significantly reduced its media presence. Publications of the results of the investigation into the genocide of the Belarusian people, for which a special section was allocated in the largest state-controlled newspaper *Belarus Today* in 2022, have practically ceased.

For example, the results of the Prosecutor General's Office investigation in 2024 can be found in only two publications: one concerning the clarification of the names of those killed in the Iŭje District, and another on the discovery of a single token of a Red Army soldier at a mass grave in Uručča. These outcomes are very modest, especially for an initiative that once looked like a major state enterprise.

Therefore, for the most part, the preservation of historical memory after 2022 was reduced to public rhetoric. It is clear that the main discursive framework has been established ("the heroic deeds of the people", "we remember the victims"), but recently a notable trend has emerged. The interpretation of the Great Patriotic War has become strikingly uniform, with state media speakers echoing almost identical phrases in unison. Interestingly, the themes of collaborationism and betrayal, which previously effectively served to denigrate the Belarusian opposition, have practically disappeared from the discussion. This shift may indicate that political division no longer poses a significant threat to the survival of the Belarusian political system, and therefore the unity of the Belarusian people in the Great Patriotic War is being emphasised more.

The "rewriting" of the history of World War II by Western countries is becoming a central theme in the coverage of historical topics in Belarusian state media. In almost every speech by Belarusian officials on the subject of the war, one can find a refrain from this main theme. For example, consider the following quotes from speeches dedicated to the Day of National Remembrance of the Victims of the Great Patriotic War and the Genocide of the Belarusian People (22 June) in 2024:

Vital Utkin (Member of the House of Representatives
of the National Assembly of the Republic of Belarus):
"We, the descendants of the Victors, are obliged to convey to all the peoples of the world the true essence of

fascism in the fight against the propaganda machine of the brutal West."8

- Aliaksandr Volfavich (State Secretary of the Security Council of the Republic of Belarus): "World War II was provoked by politicians of those countries that are trying to rewrite history."9
- Mikalai Buzin (Member of the House of Representatives of the National Assembly of the Republic of Belarus): "Our people were supposed to be destroyed. We overcame everything. We managed to recover and rise from the ashes. But those who went to war against us many years ago are now trying to dictate their will to us, to tell us how we should live."
- Aliaksei Beliaev (Political scientist): "But then, as now, the collective West sees our territory, our great Soviet people (and now Russian and Belarusian) as their opponent and enemy. They do not give up their attempts to inflict some damage on us."

Виталий Уткин, "Уткин: мы обязаны в борьбе с пропагандистской машиной Запада донести до всех народов правдивую суть фашизма", Палата представителей Национального собрания Республики Беларусь, 24 June 2024, accessed 25 May 2025, https://house.gov.by/ru/interview-ru/view/utkin-my-objazany-v-borbe-s-propagandistskojmashinoj-zapada-donesti-do-vsex-narodov-pravdivuju-sut-fashizma-11742/.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Александр Вольфович, "Вторая мировая война была спровоцирована политиками тех стран, которые пытаются переписать историю – Вольфович", *Беларусь сегодня*, 22 June 2024, accessed 25 May 2025, https://news.sb.by/articles/vtoraya-mirovaya-voynabyla-sprovotsirovana-politikami-tekh-stran-kotorye-pytayutsyaperepisat-istor.html.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Николай Бузин, "Бузин: пока жива память — государство будет развиваться", *БЕЛТА*, 22 June 2024, accessed 25 May 2025, https://belta.by/society/view/buzin-poka-zhiva-pamjat-gosudarst-vo-budet-razvivatsja-642996-2024/.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Алексей Беляев, "Беляев: победа в Великой Отечественной войне — важный фактор цивилизационного единства Беларуси и России", Беларусь сегодня, 22 June 2024, accessed 25 May 2025, https://news.sb.by/articles/belyaev-pobeda-vo-vtoroy-mirovoy-voyne-vazhnyy-faktor-tsivilizatsionnogo-edinstva-belarusi-i-rossii.html.

Natallia Kachanava (Chairperson of the Council of the Republic of the National Assembly of the Republic of Belarus): "After only eight decades of prosperous life, the planet has once again found itself on the brink of a global conflict. Another wrong step by cynical Western politicians can tear the thin fabric of peacetime, dooming the majority of humanity to inevitable death. The Belarusian people, who know the price of peace and victory like no one else, preserve historical memory and resolutely defend historical truth, so to prevent the events of the past from repeating."12

A certain semantic deformation occurs: a specific historical enemy (Nazi Germany) is transformed into an amorphous "collective West", which becomes a kind of universal phenomenon transcending time and geographic boundaries. If in 2021–22 a characteristic trope was accusations against Western countries of "rewriting history" and "destroying memory" (the destruction of monuments to Soviet soldiers in some European countries was especially acute), then the logic of state propaganda goes further: now the "collective West" is accused of unleashing World War II and orchestrating the genocide of the Belarusian people. This rhetoric has little to do with historical reality and is instead a mobilisation tool aimed at fostering hatred towards the enemy. Western countries are rhetorically positioned as such enemies. This framing makes sense only in the context of Russian aggression in Ukraine, when World War II is viewed through the prism of a contemporary confrontation. At the same time, such a rhetorical strategy can be interpreted as a demonstration of Belarus's allied role in Russia's fight against Ukraine, which enjoys the support

<sup>12</sup> Наталья Кочанова, "Кочанова: наш общий долг — бережно хранить священную память о подвиге героев-победителей", БЕЛТА, 22 June 2024, accessed 25 May 2025, https://belta.by/society/view/kochanova-nash-obschij-dolg-berezhno-hranit-svjaschennuju-pamjat-o-podvige-geroev-pobeditelej-643072-2024/.

of Western countries. Declaring itself an ally in discursive struggle does not require any special resources, as opposed to real military support.

Accusations against the "collective West" of perpetual aggression and constant attempts to subjugate the Belarusian people oddly echo the broader anti-colonialist trend in the countries of the Global South. The Belarusian authorities are seeking new allies in these countries, but rely primarily on economic diplomacy, avoiding more complex discursive constructs. Overall, the rhetoric of the Belarusian government remains static and intellectually dependent on Russian discourse; it lacks the courage to address potentially useful anti-colonialist issues.

The flip side of this "turn to the West" is another social phenomenon of the period under review: in 2024, a series of media publications featuring interviews with foreigners praising the historical feat of the Belarusian people appeared. This series was timed to coincide with Independence Day (3 July) and carried headlines such as: "Political scientist from France: National memory lives in the heart of every Belarusian"; "Matteo Peggio: The people of Italy want to preserve historical truth together with Belarusians": "Italian journalist: The role of the Soviet Union in the victory over fascism cannot be underestimated"; "We remember that the Soviet people saved us - the French thanked the Belarusians for preserving historical memory"; "Belarus is an example for the whole world in preserving history - Polish public figure"; "The Belarusian people suffered the most in the Great Patriotic War - Heinz Wehmeyer from Germany". Notably, all these foreign figures, who on Independence Day, 2024, glorified the feats of the Belarusian people in the Great Patriotic War, immediately thereafter disappeared from the focus of the Belarusian state media. This confirms the complete fabrication of the content of this media campaign.

To understand the context, it is important to consider the assessment of Vadzim Gigin, who expressed gratitude for

the promotion of the topic of the genocide of the Belarusian people not only to the Prosecutor General's Office but also to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It logically follows that this series of speeches by foreigners could have been prepared by the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, for which a developed network of "friends of the Belarusian people" was mobilised. However, this effort appears to be a clear simulation of such activity. The concept of "genocide" works when the fact of mass extermination is recognised by other countries, yet the Belarusian actors who initiated the promotion of the topic of the genocide of the Belarusian people have significant problems with this. The international scientific conference that the Prosecutor General's Office promised to hold in 2022 never took place. Instead, in December 2024, an international conference was organised, where Belarusian and Russian officials and representatives of security agencies spoke, and "public activists" from other countries were also invited<sup>13</sup>. Significantly, the discussion of genocide proceeded without the participation of historians. And even recognition from Russia can only be discussed on a limited scale, as it remains confined to declarations by Russian officials. In this situation, when the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is required to achieve international recognition, nothing better was invented than the use of its network of contacts. However, this network is very limited, consisting of the same characters, who are completely marginalised in the Western public and political space. Obviously, such measures may look impressive in reports on the activities carried out, but they have no impact on the image of Belarus abroad and certainly do not contribute to the real promotion of the topic of the genocide of the Belarusian people.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Международная конференция, приуроченная к 76-ой годовщине принятия Конвенции ООН о предупреждении преступления геноцида и наказании за него: итоги первого дня работы", Prokuratura.gov.by, 12 December 2024, accessed 25 May 2025, https://www.prokuratura.gov.by/ru/media/novosti/mezhdunarodnoe-sotrudnichestvo/mezhdunarodnaya-konf121224/.

It is also noteworthy that almost the only historical context in which Ukrainians are mentioned in state media is the participation of the Ukrainian police/collaborators in Nazi massacres of the local population, where the Khatyn case is the most prominent. Nevertheless, these media publications also constitute only a small part of the general coverage of the genocide of the Belarusian people during the war.

Although the way the Russo-Ukrainian War is reflected in the Belarusian state media lies beyond the scope of this study<sup>14</sup>, it is important to note that the tendency to contrast the Ukrainian people (as part of the symbolic triad of fraternal peoples) and the Ukrainian (Kyiv) authorities, depicted as the main culprits of the war, largely persists. At the same time, the Belarusian media do not use Russian historical rhetoric that portrays Ukraine as an artificial state formed exclusively in Soviet times. Obviously, the same rhetoric could be applied to the creation of the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic, whose successor is the Republic of Belarus. Despite all the rhetorical support for the Russian side in the ongoing war, the Belarusian authorities are trying to jealously preserve at least the symbolic remains of their independence, and therefore the theme of the artificiality of the Soviet national states' creation falls into the list of undesirable topics for development in the media discourse.

#### **Conclusions**

An analysis of publications in the state media of Belarus in 2024 shows that after the surge of 2021–22, "historical memory" has ceased to be of primary importance for the political mobilisation of the population.

Historical politics in Belarus remains directly dependent on the general political situation in the country, but historical

See Petro Katerynych, "Propaganda at Play: A Thematic Analysis of Belarusian Media Narratives in the Context of the Russo-Ukrainian War", Media Literacy and Academic Research 6, no. 1 (2023): 23–39.

issues have clearly lost priority and are no longer as discursively dominant as before. Based on a monitoring of the Belarusian media, it can be argued that priorities are changing and the interpretation of history is gradually losing its leading position in the political discourse of the Belarusian authorities. In essence, we are talking about the inertial continuation of the direction of historical politics that was adopted in 2021-22, when several important new initiatives were launched, such as recognition of the genocide of the Belarusian people. After 2022, there were almost no new initiatives in the field of historical politics, although significant changes appeared in the official rhetoric, which are worth analysing. In this context, a new framework was built around the interpretation of the Great Patriotic War of 1941-45, when the situation of confrontation with the West following the beginning of Russian aggression against Ukraine led to the unexpected creation of the image of an eternal enemy - the "collective West". At the same time, such rhetoric provides the Belarusian authorities with a convenient niche, in which verbal support for Russia allows them to avoid deeper involvement in the military conflict.

## Chapter 3

# RUSSIA'S ENEMY NO. 1: STEPAN BANDERA IN UKRAINE'S POLITICS OF MEMORY DURING THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR

Yurii Latysh

### Introduction

In the autumn of 2021, a viral craze swept through the Ukrainian segment of TikTok: schoolchildren posted videos of themselves performing the first verse of the song "Our father is Bandera, Ukraine is our mother! We will fight for Ukraine!" A group of MPs joined the initiative and sang "Our father is Bandera" in parliament<sup>2</sup>. According to Oleksiy Danilov, former Secretary of the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine, this was the moment when the

<sup>&</sup>quot;Батько наш Бандера, – в украинском Tik-Tok новый тренд", You-Tube, Новини Главред, 13 October 2021, accessed 31 May 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R wnvSUB-aM.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Ojciec nasz Bandera" w ukraińskim parlamencie", Interia, Wydarzenia, 22 October 2021, accessed 28 August 2025, https://wydarzenia.interia.pl/zagranica/news-ojciec-nasz-bandera-w-ukrainskim-parlamencie.nId,5598234.

authorities realised that society was ready for war<sup>3</sup>. This chapter aims to analyse the evolution of attitudes towards Stepan Bandera in Ukraine during the Russo-Ukrainian War and the construction of his mythological image as a fighter against Russian imperialism.

The glorification of extreme nationalists during military conflicts is a common phenomenon. During the Yugoslav Wars, Transnistrian War, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and other armed conflicts in post-socialist Europe, attempts were made to rehabilitate and glorify nationalist figures and individuals who collaborated with the Nazis during World War II. In India, amid the recurrent bloody conflict ongoing with Pakistan, Nazi collaborator Subhas Chandra Bose is currently promoted as one of the country's foremost national heroes<sup>4</sup>.

In the 1990s, Bandera and the Ukrainian nationalist movement were local heroes in Western Ukraine. Here, the communicative memory about them had always been preserved (during the Soviet era, as a form of counter-memory), while the cultural memory was shaped and imported into Ukraine by nationalist organisations of the diaspora. The key actors of memory promoting Bandera included veterans of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), local authorities, and the Prosvita society. In school textbooks, the leader of the revolutionary faction of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and his supporters began to be presented as part of the Resistance, which allegedly had two wings: Soviet partisans and nationalists. Consequently,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Юлія Соколова, "Прибрали п'яту колону і пропаганду: Данілов про підготовку до вторгнення РФ", Факти, 15 May 2023, accessed 31 May 2025, https://fakty.com.ua/ua/ukraine/20230515-prybraly-pyatu-kolonu-i-propagandu-danilov-pro-pidgotovku-do-vtorgnennya-rf/.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Tirthankar Hudati and Arati Hudati, "Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose: The National Hero of India", *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Research* 11, no. 4 (2025): 70–2.

many residents of Western Ukraine developed an idealised and heroic image of Bandera<sup>5</sup>.

In 1993, the Presidium of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine adopted a resolution "On Checking the Activities of the OUN-UPA". In 1997, following a directive of the president of Ukraine, the Government Commission for the Study of the Activities of the OUN and UPA was established, which operated until 2004. A working group of historians under this commission, headed by Professor Stanislav Kulchytsky, published its "Professional Opinion" denying the fascist nature of the ideology of the OUN.

Later, in 2002, the Centre for the Research of the Liberation Movement, led by Volodymyr Viatrovych, was founded. This organisation – sometimes referred to as the "front organisation" of the Bandera faction of the OUN (OUN-B)<sup>8</sup> – focused on the glorification of the OUN and UPA. Eight years later, in a controversial move as he campaigned for re-election, President Viktor Yushchenko conferred the title of Hero of Ukraine on Bandera between the two rounds of voting, a decree that was later overturned in the courts. In spring 2010, now-former President Yushchenko wrote a letter to European Parliament President Jerzy Buzek, in which

<sup>&</sup>quot;Іван-Павло Химка: «Молодому поколінню трудно вірити, що націоналісти робили все те, що я й інші дослідники описуємо»", Спільне, 30 June 2010, accessed 31 May 2025, https://commons.com. ua/uk/dzhon-pol-himka-molodomu-pokolinnyu-tru/.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Постанова Президії Верховної Ради України "До питання про перевірку діяльності ОУН–УПА", Відомості Верховної Ради України, № 14 (1993): 130.

Станіслав Кульчицький, Проміжний звіт робочої групи для підготовки історичного висновку про діяльність ОУН–УПА: Історичний висновок про діяльність ОУН–УПА: Попередній варіант (Київ: Інститут історії України Національної академії наук України, 2000); Організація українських націоналістів і Українська повстанська армія: Фаховий висновок робочої групи істориків при Урядовій комісії з вивчення діяльності ОУН і УПА (Київ: Наукова думка, 2005).

Per A. Rudling, "Warfare or War Criminality? Volodymyr V'iatrovych, Druha pol's'ko-ukrains'ka viina, 1942–1947 (Kyiv: Vydavnychyi dim 'Kyevo-Mohylians'ka akademiia,' 2011). 228 pp. ISBN: 978-966-518-567", Ab Imperio, no. 1 (2012): 357.

he stated that Bandera had become a "symbol of the Ukrainian liberation struggle" during his lifetime.

The glorification of the OUN-B leader followed the activities of nationalists, influential intellectuals, and the administrations of Presidents Viktor Yushchenko and Petro Poroshenko, as well as Russian aggression carried out under the slogans of fighting against "Ukrainian Nazism" and "Banderaism" (Bandera's ideology).

#### **Nationalists**

Nationalist political forces played a significant role in glorifying Bandera at the national level. They systematically denied or justified controversial aspects of the OUN's history, including its use of terrorist methods, admiration of fascism and Nazism, collaboration with the Abwehr, the formation of battalions within the Wehrmacht, participation in police forces in occupied territories, and involvement in the extermination of Poles and Jews. These actions were justified as stemming from political expediency and the idea of fighting for an independent Ukraine.

Despite the small number and low level of popularity of nationalist political parties, such as the All-Ukrainian Union "Svoboda", the Ukrainian National Assembly — Ukrainian People's Self-Defence, the Congress of Ukrainian Nationalists, Right Sector, and the National Corps, they have skilfully imposed their ideology on society. By equating nationalism with patriotism and nationalist ideas with the struggle for independence, the leadership of these parties proclaimed the pseudo-logical conclusion that Bandera's opponents were not Ukrainians but enemies of the Ukrainian state. Since 2006, nationalists in Kyiv have organised torchlight processions on 1 January to commemorate Stepan Bandera's

<sup>&</sup>quot;Ющенко написав главі Європарламенту, що польські герої такі ж, як Бандера", Українська правда, 25 March 2010, accessed 1 July 2025, https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2010/03/25/4889354/.

birthday, an event that has grown to include more cities each year.

It would be a mistake to assess the influence of nationalists solely based on the results of parliamentary elections, in which they gained just over 2% of the vote in 2019. Their influence today is determined by other factors: 1) partial control of the security forces, including the army, police, and special services; 2) monopolistic control over street protests, as nationalists are the only political force in Ukraine capable of organising mass demonstrations; 3) control of a number of local government bodies – "Svoboda" party members serve as mayors in three regional centres (Ternopil, Ivano-Frankivsk, Khmelnytskyi) and hold the position of the head of the Ternopil regional council; and 4) cultural hegemony of nationalism.

Historian Per A. Rudling has analysed how, since 2014, radical nationalists have attained senior positions in academia (e.g., deans and vice-chancellors at top universities), the Ministry of Education, the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory (UINM), and the archives of the Security Service of Ukraine. The hard right has gained disproportionate influence on "soft issues" of identity and the shaping of "national memory" – not only by running the governmental memory institutes, but also through hands-on drafting of memory laws outlawing "disrespect" for the OUN, the UPA, and other historical far-right groups<sup>10</sup>.

The occupation of Crimea and the invasion of Donbas forced the Ukrainian government to look for historical heroes who had fought against Russia with arms in hand. Ukrainian authorities controlling the politics of memory chose the strategy of mnemonic warrior during the ongoing

Per A. Rudling, "Repatriating An Edifying Past: The Diaspora Ukrainian Authoritarian Right and Power Over Memory, 1991–2021", Nationalities Papers 52, no. 6 (2024): 1308–31; Per A. Rudling, Tarnished Heroes: The Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists in the Memory Politics of Post-Soviet Ukraine (Stuttgart: Ibidem Verlag, 2024).

war, utilising the OUN, UPA, and the persona of Stepan Bandera, leader of the revolutionary faction of the OUN, as Russia's enemy No. 1 to mentally mobilise the population. After 2014, Bandera was particularly suitable for this purpose due to his categorical rejection of any cooperation with Russian politicians – whether Bolsheviks, imperialists, or democrats – and his staunch anti-imperialist stance, which advocated for the disintegration of Russia into nation states. For Bandera, both Russia and the Russian people were fundamentally hostile forces. The OUN-B leader was also attractive to the Ukrainian authorities because of his radical anti-communism, anti-socialism, and rejection of any leftist ideology<sup>11</sup>.

In this way, the nationalist narrative secured cultural hegemony. Sympathy for the nationalist movement of World War II and for Bandera personally shifted from a marginal and regional narrative to a dominant one. Negative attitudes towards him have become toxic. Ukrainian politicians, including former President Petro Poroshenko and former Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk, who were previously indifferent to the OUN-B leader, began expressing admiration for him.

#### **Intellectuals**

The glorification of Bandera has also been promoted by many Ukrainian intellectuals and historians, who tried to refute accusations of the OUN's cooperation with Nazi Germany and portrayed it as a democratic force. Among these was Volodymyr Viatrovych, who headed the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory from 2014 to 2019 and now serves as a member of parliament. During the war, he suggested considering Bandera not only a hero of the past but also a model

Степан Бандера, Перспективи Української Революції (Київ: Наш формат, 2023), 161.

for contemporary politics. He has expressed the belief that a person does not belong to the Ukrainian political nation if he or she does not share the opinion that the Ukrainian nationalist movement led to the proclamation of an independent Ukraine and was not criminal<sup>12</sup>. On 5 December 2024, Viatrovych wrote on his Facebook page:

Bandera is not only about the persistent, uncompromising struggle for freedom. The most important aspect of his legacy is the principle of self-reliance. This is the approach that should be crucial for building a strong, independent Ukraine. That is why Bandera is most hated by those who do not want Ukraine to become such.<sup>13</sup>

Historians, following political activists, began using the word "Providnyk" (Leader or Führer) – as OUN members referred to Bandera – with a capital letter and without quotation marks in their publications. Historian Bohdan Temirov "scientifically substantiated" the nationalist thesis that attitudes towards Bandera serve as an indicator of attitudes towards Ukraine. According to the scholar, negativity or even indifference towards the OUN-B leader can only be expressed by those who do not have "clear statehood aspirations", profess a "dual Ukrainian—Russian identity", or remain "in the grip of Soviet myths". Ukraine's defenders, in Temirov's views, "considered him [Bandera] their leader,

Iван Сіяк, "«Росія – це те, що будували українські інтелектуали»: Володимир В'ятрович – про колоніальне минуле України та її відносини з Польщею", Bird In Flight, 3 August 2023, accessed 27 May 2025, https://birdinflight.com/portret-uk/20230802-volodimir-vyatrovich-interview.html.

Volodymyr Viatrovych, "Бандера – це не лише про завзяту безкомпромісну боротьбу за свободу. Найважливішим в його спадщині є принцип опори на власні сили…", Facebook, 5 December 2024, https://www.facebook.com/volodymyr.viatrovych/posts/pfbid04Rpi dWFoqA7pdLeXafxinmPXboXmB9qrdiCEccuWCzfqr9prjAeNiUgf6M3 PBbbHI.

recognising certain errors, but putting his consistency in defending Ukraine's independence in the foreground."<sup>14</sup>

Some Ukrainian intellectuals react with discomfort to attempts by foreign politicians and scholars to critically examine Ukraine's politics of history. This is presented as interference in internal affairs and as attempts to take advantage of the Russo-Ukrainian War to impose a vision of history and the heroes that Ukrainians should honour. Viatrovych demands full "historical sovereignty":

We do not tell our Polish colleagues whom and how to honour. Those figures of Polish history who are very far from being called heroes by Ukrainians – Józef Piłsudski, for example – of course, he will never be a hero for Ukrainians. But I consider it completely unacceptable and abnormal if any Ukrainian politician were to tell the Poles, "Stop honouring Józef Piłsudski immediately, because we know that there were parts of his biography that can clearly be interpreted as anti-Ukrainian"...<sup>15</sup>

Among Ukrainian intellectuals, it is common to compare Stepan Bandera with Józef Piłsudski and Menachem Begin and to accuse Poland and Israel of double standards, claiming that they glorify individuals involved in terrorism while denying Ukraine the right to do the same<sup>16</sup>. However, they

Богдан Теміров, Постать Степана Бандери в соціокультурному просторі України: історичний вимір: Дисертація на здобуття наукового ступеня доктора філософії за спеціальністю 032 – історія та археологія (Вінниця; Запоріжжя 2022), 197.

Quoted in Ростислав Хотин, "«Бандера є для українців саме антисовєтським, антиросійським, а не антипольським символом» історик", *Paðio Свобода*, 4 January 2023, accessed 27 May 2025, https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/ukrayina-polshcha-stepan-bandera-foto-zaluzhnyy/32207655.html.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Юрій Бутусов, "Терористи чи національні герої? Бандера, Пілсудський, Бегін", *Главком*, 9 July 2016, accessed 29 May 2025, https://glavcom.ua/columns/yuriybutusov/teroristi-chi-nacionalnigeroji-bandera-pilsudskiy-begin-360834.html.

fail to mention that Piłsudski and Begin were recognised not only for their armed struggle but also for their state-building efforts. For example, Begin ended a long-standing war with Egypt, signed a peace treaty, and won the Nobel Peace Prize. Bandera, in contrast, never expressed regret after World War II for the participation of Ukrainian nationalists in the Holocaust or in the murders of Poles.

There is no scholarly biography of Bandera in Ukraine. Almost all texts about him have been written either by his supporters or his opponents, who hold pro-Soviet or pro-Russian positions. Consequently, Ukrainians had to choose between glorification and demonisation of Bandera. Scholars are afraid to tackle this highly politicised topic, which can easily lead to ostracism. According to the historian Yaroslav Hrytsak, Bandera is "Mr 10,000 volts whoever touches him will receive a strong blow of criticism, and you don't know from which side."17 When the German historian of Polish origin Grzegorz Rossolinski-Liebe undertook to write a biography of Bandera, he faced not only criticism but also threats. In 2012, members of the "Svoboda" party disrupted his lectures in several Ukrainian cities, and the only place he could speak was at the German Embassy in Kyiv.

On 17 March 2023, the Rivne Regional Council appealed to the president of Ukraine and the head of the Security Service of Ukraine to ban "distribution of anti-Ukrainian literature in Ukraine". The book in question was Rossolinski-Liebe's book, *Stepan Bandera: The Life and Afterlife of a Ukrainian Nationalist: Fascism, Genocide, and Cult*, published in Kyiv in 2021. This appeal was initiated by the deputy head of the regional council from the nationalist "Svoboda" party, Oleksiy Buchynskyy, who claimed that

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Михайло Глуховський, "Ярослав Грицак: Зв'язок між Бандерою і Залужним є дуже відчутним", *Главком*, 17 January 2023, accessed 28 May 2025, https://glavcom.ua/interviews/jaroslav-hritsak-zvjazok-mizh-banderoju-izaluzhnim-je-duzhe-vidchutnim-902543.html.

a "fifth column" was operating in Ukraine. In his opinion, the book fell under "all articles on inciting ethnic hatred, disrespect for the Ukrainian nation and heroes", and it was written by "neo-Marxist authors, historians from Germany Rossolinski and Liebe". Not a single council member voted against this appeal, and none abstained.

In January 2025, the retail chain Librarium withdrew Rossolinski-Liebe's book from sale after activist Diana Makarova criticised it in a social media post. Despite not having read the book, Makarova labelled its sale a "blatant collaboration with the enemy" and asserted, "Calls for a democratic attitude to alternative views of history do not work during war." <sup>18</sup>

In place of scholarly literature about Bandera, children's books glorifying him are published in Ukraine. He has partly replicated the role that Vladimir Lenin once held in Soviet children's literature. In 2011, the Kapranov brothers' publishing house Zelenvi Pes released Vita Levitska's book Bandera and I, in which two schoolboy brothers investigate Bandera's life story<sup>19</sup>. At the end of 2024, Vivat Publishing House released a comic book, Murder on the Stairs: The Last Years of Stepan Bandera, with Viatrovych serving as the scientific adviser. The plot is set in 1957 Munich, where Bandera, living under an assumed name, works as a journalist, raises his children, and evades KGB operatives hunting him worldwide. His eldest daughter, fascinated by Ukrainian history, becomes interested in Bandera, unaware that her father is the very figure she reads about. Additionally, in 2025, the State Film Agency of Ukraine allocated almost \$565,000 from the national budget to create a film titled Why I Killed Bandera.

Diana Makarova, "Пост про скандальну книгу, яка й досі лежить на полицях у вільному продажу «Жизнь Степана Бандеры. Фашизм. Терроризм. Геноцид. Культ» зібрав 2 тисячі репостів...", Facebook, 4 January 2025, https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1BfJr9Yg2f/.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Віта Левицька, *Степан Бандера і я* (Київ: Зелений пес, 2011).

### **Russian Influence**

The Bandera myth has also been promoted by Russia, where he is an important part of the ideological myth of mass collaboration between Ukrainians and the Nazis, President Vladimir Putin called the OUN-B leader, along with Andrei Vlasov, Philipp Peten, and Vidkun Quisling, traitors and torturers who surpassed their Nazi masters in inhumanity<sup>20</sup>. Commenting on the refusal to invite Russia to events marking the 80th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, the Russian president stressed that it was shameful to invite people who honour Bandera, guilty of the Holocaust and the extermination of hundreds of thousands of Jews, Russians, and Poles. "Today's Ukrainian leadership has elevated Bandera to the status of a national hero. This is the symbol of Ukrainian statehood today," Putin asserted21. Former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev referred to the country as the "Bandera state", commenting on the advance of Russian troops into the Dnipropetrovsk region: "The shagreen skin of the Bandera state is shrinking."22

## **Changing Attitudes of Ukrainians Towards Bandera**

Ukrainian society's view of Bandera has shifted significantly in recent years. On the one hand, Viatrovych and nationalist parties have meticulously constructed the myth of Bandera as Russia's enemy No. 1. On the other hand, Russia has used torchlight processions honouring the OUN-B leader and

Vladimir Putin, "The Real Lessons of the 75th Anniversary of World War II", The National Interest, 18 June 2020, accessed 30 May 2025, https://nationalinterest.org/feature/vladimir-putin-real-lessons-75th-anniversaryworld-war-ii-162982.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> "Путин: Бандера для сегодняшнего руководства Украины является национальным героем", *Smotrim.ru*, 2 February 2025, accessed 31 May 2025, https://smotrim.ru/article/4339573.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> "Медведев: шагреневая кожа бандеровского государства сжимается", *HTB*, 8 June 2025, accessed 28 August 2025, https://www.ntv.ru/novosti/2907680/.

other events held by nationalist forces to justify the ongoing war under the pretext of "denazification". In response, many Ukrainians began to sympathise with the nationalists in order to spite the Kremlin. Nationalist views have often been used as a form of trolling against Russia, but just as frequently, this trolling has turned into genuine sympathy for nationalism and for Bandera himself.

Russia's aggression, combined with the hegemony of the nationalist narrative, has transformed Ukrainian society's attitude towards the OUN, UPA, and Stepan Bandera. In 2012, only 22% of respondents viewed the OUN-B leader positively, while 58% held a negative view. In 2018, public opinion had become more evenly split, with 36% holding positive and 34% negative views. However, after the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, attitudes shifted dramatically. At the end of April 2022, one poll showed that 74% of Ukrainians had a positive attitude towards Bandera (Figure 1). In January 2023, his approval

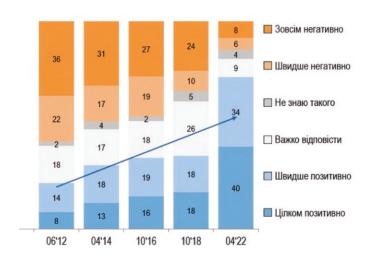


Figure 1. Dynamics of public attitudes towards Stepan Bandera according to the Sociological Group "Rating" (2012–22).

Source: "The Tenth National Survey: Ideological markers of the war (April 27, 2022)", Rating Group, 3 May 2022, accessed 15 November 2025, https://www.ratinggroup.ua/en/news/desyatyy-obschenacionalnyy-opros-ideologicheskie-markery-voyny-27-aprelya-2022.

had reached 83%<sup>23</sup>. This change in public sentiment was not the result of new information about OUN-B's leader but rather a reaction to Russian aggression.

Following 24 February 2022, the Bandera myth was recognised by a large part of Ukrainian society as a symbol of resistance to the Russian invasion. At the same time, a dangerous tendency to present the OUN's leader as an ideal hero and to harass his critics is becoming increasingly evident.

### **Bandera in Ukrainian Toponymy**

The hegemony of the nationalist narrative is embodied in the marking of urban and rural spaces with appropriate place names and monuments. As of August 2021, there were 107 streets, avenues, and lanes named after Bandera in 15 regions of Ukraine, as well as 43 monuments in four western regions: Ivano-Frankivsk region, 10 (the first unveiled in his native village of Stary Uhryniv on 15 October 1990; the second in Kolomyia on 18 August 1991; the rest during the presidencies of Viktor Yushchenko and Petro Poroshenko); Lviv region, 20 (e.g. in Boryslav in 1998, in Drohobych in 2001, and in Lviv in 2007); Ternopil region, 11; and Rivne region, 2<sup>24</sup>. According to other estimates, by early 2014, there were 46 Bandera monuments or busts in western regions, along with 14 memorial plaques. Many of these appeared on the initiative of, or with the participation of, nationalist parties, which use them during commemorative events and political actions<sup>25</sup>. As a result of the decolonisation of toponymy in 2023-24, the number of streets, avenues,

Історична пам'ять: результати соціологічного опитування дорослих жителів України. Аналітичний звіт (2023) (Київ: Київський міжнародний інститут соціології, 2023), accessed 31 May 2025, https://www.kiis.com.ua/materials/news/20230320\_d2/UCBI\_ History2023\_rpt\_UA\_fin.pdf.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Теміров, *Постать Степана Бандери...*, 251–2.

Andre Liebich and Oksana Myshlovska, "Bandera: memorialization and commemoration", Nationalities Papers 42, no. 5 (2014): 752, 761.

and lanes named after Bandera in cities and towns alone reached 118, with 29 located in the Lviv region. According to figures provided by Russian propagandists, his surname appears in 636 urbanonyms across Ukraine<sup>26</sup>.

Streets named after the leader of the OUN-B also appeared in Kakhovka and Skadovsk in the Kherson region, despite both cities having been occupied by Russian troops since February 2022. The purpose of such renaming was trolling: for instance, Russian "administrative" bodies are now located on Bandera Street. In the spring of 2024, a Bandera Street was introduced in the village of Kozacha Lopan in the Kharkiv region, where military actions had been conducted and almost no intact buildings or residents remained.

# Ukrainian Authorities, Bandera, and Polish-Ukrainian Mnemonic Conflict

Ukrainian authorities, historians, and intellectuals generally adhere to the position that one can speak about Bandera aut bene, aut nihil. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has adopted the strategy of mnemonic abnegator. A search for words such as "Bandera", "Shukhevych", "OUN", or "UPA" on the official website of the president of Ukraine yields no results. The sole reference to "Bandera" is in connection with Ukrainians preparing "Bandera smoothies" – the name given to Molotov cocktails during the full-scale Russian invasion<sup>27</sup>. Zelenskyy deliberately avoids addressing this chapter of Ukrainian history, even though he usually

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> "Спецпроект «Украинский нацизм. Захват культурного и информационного пространства»", *TACC. Крибрум*, 20 June 2024, accessed 1 July 2025, https://tass.kribrum.ru/nazism.

Володимир Зеленський, "Звернення Президента України з нагоди Дня Гідності та Свободи", Президент України. Офіційне інтернетпредставництво, 21 November 2022, accessed 31 August 2025, https://www.president.gov.ua/news/zvernennya-prezidenta-ukrayini-z-nagodi-dnya-gidnosti-ta-svo-79309.

responds sensitively to public sentiment and seeks to coordinate his public activity with it. He spoke about the OUN-B leader directly only once, under pressure from journalists, when he limited his response to the assertion that everyone who defended Ukraine's independence is a hero, adding that time alone will determine who Bandera really was<sup>28</sup>. Early in his presidency, Zelenskyy also remarked that Bandera would be shocked to learn how many streets bear his name<sup>29</sup>. The president's silence was particularly eloquent on 1 January 2024 (Bandera's birthday), when Russian drones destroyed the Roman Shukhevych Museum in Lviv and damaged the university in Dubliany where Bandera studied.

In June 2023, Zelenskyy supported the idea of reinterring "all our heroes who are buried abroad" in Ukraine<sup>30</sup>. Bandera may be among those considered for reburial. However, the realisation of the Ukrainian Pantheon project appears unlikely in the near future due to the ongoing war and financial difficulties. The idea of reburial emerged following the start of construction of the National Military Memorial Cemetery near Kyiv. Historian Vakhtang Kipiani has reported that Bandera's relatives living abroad fear his grave could be damaged by vandals or become a bargaining chip in political games. According to Kipiani, in order to persuade the family, the authorities should publicly state that there will be no revision in the future regarding the figure of Bandera

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Євген Руденко, Роман Кравець та Ельдар Сарахман, "«Хотів заразитися коронавірусом». Два дні з президентом Зеленським", Українська правда, 9 June 2020, accessed 31 May 2025, https://www.pravda.com.ua/articles/2020/06/9/7254917/.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Зеленський: Бандера був би в шоці, скільки вулиць з його ім'ям", Українська правда, 10 October 2019, accessed 1 July 2025, https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2019/10/10/7228731/.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Володимир Зеленський, "Україна перемоги буде країною, гідною своїх героїв – виступ Президента на пленарному засіданні Верховної Ради з нагоди 27-ї річниці ухвалення Конституції", Президент України. Офіційне інтернет-представництво, 28 June 2023, accessed 30 May 2025, https://www.president.gov.ua/news/ukrayina-peremogi-bude-krayinoyu-gidnoyu-svoyih-geroyivvist-83869.

and the Ukrainian nationalists of the 20th century. In particular, the president of Ukraine should issue a new decree awarding Bandera the title "Hero of Ukraine" or reinstate the earlier decree of President Yushchenko<sup>31</sup>. For now, however, Zelenskyy does not appear prepared to take such steps.

Following Russia's full-scale invasion, Zelenskyv made a series of decisions that contributed to the glorification of the legacy of Ukrainian nationalism. In May 2022, he established a state award for military personnel, the Cross of Military Merit<sup>32</sup>. Its design draws from the historical Cross of Combat Merit of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army and the Ukrainian Supreme Liberation Council, but with modifications: the ribbon features the colours of the modern Ukrainian flag, not the UPA flag, and the swords are pointed upward as a symbol of victory. In October 2022, Zelenskyy awarded the title of Hero of Ukraine to Myroslav Symchych (1923-2023), a commander in the UPA and political prisoner in Soviet concentration camps<sup>33</sup>. In December 2024, the 1039th Anti-Aircraft Missile Regiment of the Ukrainian Land Forces was conferred the honorary title "named after General Mykola Kapustiansky", one of the leaders of the Melnyk faction of the OUN, who in 1941 served as deputy chairman of the Ukrainian National Council in Nazi-occupied Kyiv<sup>34</sup>. In July 2025, the 31st Separate Mechanised Brigade

<sup>31</sup> Віталій Тараненко, "Історик Вахтанг Кіпіані: Президент Зеленський повинен повернути Бандері Героя України", Главком, 16 August 2024, accessed 30 May 2025, https://glavcom.ua/interviews/istorik-vakhtanh-kipiani-prezident-zelenskij-povinen-povernuti-banderi-heroja-ukrajini-1015305.html.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Указ Президента України від 5.05.2022 № 314/2022 "Про відзнаку Президента України «Хрест бойових заслуг»", Президент України. Офіційне інтернет-представництво, accessed 31 August 2025, https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/3142022-42449.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> Указ Президента України від 14.10.2022 № 699/2022 "Про присвоєння М. Симчичу звання Герой України", *Президент України. Офіційне інтернет-представництво*, accessed 31 August 2025, https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/6992022-44385.

³4 Указ Президента України від 11.12.2024 № 852/2024 "Про присвоєння почесного найменування 1039 зенітному ракетному

of the Ukrainian Land Forces was assigned the honorary name "General Leonid Stupnytskyi"<sup>35</sup>, marking the first time a Ukrainian military unit had been named after a UPA figure.

The former head of the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory, Anton Drobovych (2019-24), considers Bandera a controversial figure with radical views. While he respects Bandera's persistence in the fight for Ukrainian independence, he condemns his involvement in terrorist activities against Poland and Poles<sup>36</sup>. The current head of the UINM, Oleksandr Alfiorov, also regards Bandera as an ambiguous figure. However, Russia's demonisation of the OUN-B leader has reinforced his place in the popular culture as a symbol of Ukrainian resistance<sup>37</sup>. According to Alfiorov, Roman Shukhevych contributed more to the creation of the Ukrainian state than Bandera<sup>38</sup>. Other government officials treat Bandera with much greater reverence. For instance, former Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal, who is currently the minister of defence, referred to him as a historical figure who dedicated his life to the creation of an independent

полку Сухопутних військ Збройних Сил України", Президент України. Офіційне інтернет-представництво, accessed 31 August 2025, https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/8522024-53177.

Указ Президента України від 14.07.2025 № 488/2025 "Про присвоєння почесного найменування 31 окремій механізованій бригаді Сухопутних військ Збройних Сил України", Президент України. Офіційне інтернет-представництво, accessed 31 August 2025, https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/4882025-55685.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Маґдалєна Ріґамонті, "Антон Дробович: Я ненавиджу війну", *Нова Польща*, 10 July 2023, accessed 30 May 2025, https://novapolshcha.pl/article/anton-drobovich-ya-nenavidzhu-viinu/.

<sup>37 &</sup>quot;Олександр Алфьоров: Ми не нація кріпаків, ми – нація воїнів", РБК-Україна, 3 February 2024, accessed 30 August 2025, https://www.rbc.ua/ rus/styler/interv-yu-istorikom-i-viyskovim-oleksandrom-170668-8865.html.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Дмитро Дубенський, "Бандера — не головний символ боротьби: історик про «уособлення зла» для росіян", *Telegraf*, 23 August 2024, accessed 30 August 2025, https://news.telegraf.com.ua/ukr/ ukraina/2024-08-23/5868564-bandera-ne-golovniy-simvol-borotbiistorik-pro-uosoblennya-zla-dlya-rosiyan.

Ukrainian state at a time "when there were no democratic levers for this struggle." <sup>39</sup>

Former Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine Valerii Zaluzhnyi articulated his sympathies for OUN-B leader even more explicitly. He kept a bronze bust of Bandera in his office. On 1 January 2023, a photo of Zaluzhnyi next to Bandera's portrait was posted on the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine's Twitter account. The accompanying text read:

The complete and final victory of Ukrainian nationalism will come when the Russian Empire ceases to exist. The struggle against the Russian Empire is taking place now. And Stepan Bandera's instructions are well known to the commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces.<sup>40</sup>

The then Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki immediately responded, stating that Poland was critical of any glorification of Bandera and promising to raise the issue in his next conversation with his Ukrainian counterpart. After Morawiecki's démarche, the controversial tweet was deleted on 2 January<sup>41</sup>.

Politician Viktor Ukolov called the publication of this photo a strategic mistake:

First, Zaluzhnyi is already much greater than Bandera, because his decisions destroyed more enemies and managed to protect Ukraine. Second, unlike Bandera, there is no

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> Віталій Червоненко, "Денис Шмигаль: «Готовий піти у відставку, коли скаже Зеленський»", *BBC Україна*, 30 June 2020, accessed 31 May 2025, https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/features-53221100.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in Хотин, "«Бандера є для українців...".

Marcin Kozłowski, "Ukraiński parlament upamiętnił Stepana Banderę. Morawiecki: Nie ma żadnych słów usprawiedliwienia", Gazeta.pl, 2 January 2023, accessed 30 May 2025, https://wiadomosci.gazeta. pl/wiadomosci/7,114884,29319814,ukrainski-parlament-upamietnil-stepana-bandere-morawiecki.html.

'compromising information' on Zaluzhnyi – he did not collaborate with the Wehrmacht (Abwehr – for clarification) and was not the murderer of a Polish minister-politician. 42

After this incident, Zaluzhnyi refrained from making public statements about Bandera.

During the 2025 Polish presidential elections, historical issues returned to the spotlight. Karol Nawrocki took a firm stance, asserting that if Ukraine does not acknowledge responsibility for the Volhynia massacre, he would be against its accession to the European Union and NATO<sup>43</sup>.

Even more pointed statements were made by another Polish presidential candidate, Sławomir Mentzen. On 24 February 2025, he visited Lviv and recorded a video in front of a monument to Stepan Bandera. Mentzen declared that Bandera

is a terrorist who, back in the Second Polish Republic, was sentenced to death by a Polish court for the murder of Poles. Later, he founded the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists, which is responsible for the massacre in Volhynia. This man's people murdered 100,000 Poles.<sup>44</sup>

He further asserted that Ukraine must end the cult of Bandera as soon as possible. "It is as if monuments were being

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> Віктор Уколов, "На мій погляд з боку радників Залужного — це була стратегічна помилка. По-перше, Залужний вже значно більше Бандери, бо його рішення знищили більше ворогів...", Facebook, 4 January 2023, https://www.facebook.com/VikUkolov/posts/pfbidO 36eyU3x4KgA183wo7eamqecF5MYv19A6amXWnZWSd7RuTUDovsxZ PrKDJXZMBWLArl.

<sup>43 &</sup>quot;Karol Nawrocki złożył deklarację ws. Ukrainy w NATO. Wspomniał o »rozliczeniach«", *Polsatnews.pl*, 8 January 2025, accessed 30 May 2025, https://www.polsatnews.pl/wiadomosc/2025-01-08/karol-nawrocki-w-gosciu-wydarzen/.

Sławomir Mentzen (@SlawomirMentzen), "Ukraińcy dalej czczą zbrodniarzy odpowiedzialnych za zabicie 100 tysięcy Polaków!", X, 25 February 2025, 10:38 am, https://x.com/SlawomirMentzen/ status/1894321178526830755.

built to Hitler in Germany," added Member of the European Parliament Anna Bryłka, who accompanied Mentzen<sup>45</sup>. Lviv Mayor Andriy Sadovyi responded by calling Mentzen a pro-Russian politician and urged him to go to the front and record a video in Donetsk. Journalist and historian Vakhtang Kipiani also reacted, reminding Mentzen of the fate of Minister Bronisław Pieracki<sup>46</sup>, assassinated by Ukrainian nationalists, and using the Russian slogan "We can do it again".

Bandera remains a *stolperstein* (stumbling block) for Polish–Ukrainian understanding and reconciliation. Different interpretations of the history of World War II retain the potential to provoke international conflict. Disputes over assessing the activities and legacy of Ukrainian nationalism in the 1920s–1950s overshadow both Polish–Ukrainian understanding and Ukrainian–Israeli relations. Although the ascent of Volodymyr Zelenskyy to power and Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 resulted in a significant reduction in tension between the neighbouring countries and improved relations, the Polish–Ukrainian contradictions in the field of historical memory still remain unresolved.

#### **Conclusions**

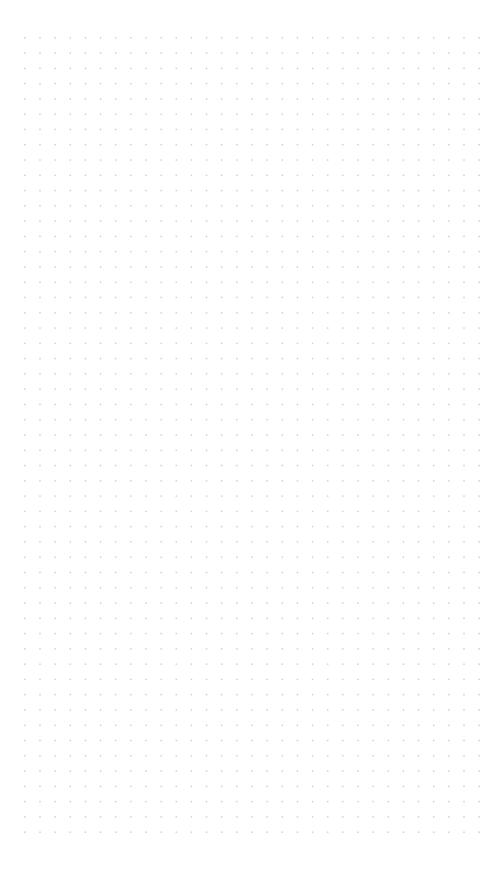
The hybrid warfare that began in 2014 and the full-scale Russian invasion of 2022 created a backdrop and a favourable environment for the disproportionate influence of the nationalist forces and the elevation of Stepan Bandera to the pedestal of a Ukrainian hero. The Ukrainian Institute of National Memory, along with intellectuals and nationalist political forces, has constructed a "retrotopia" (a term coined by sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman) – a glorified image of the OUN-B leader as a fighter against

<sup>45</sup> Mentzen, "Ukraińcy dalej czczą zbrodniarzy...".

<sup>46</sup> Bronisław Pieracki (1895–1934) was a Polish colonel and politician who served as Minister of Internal Affairs in the Second Polish Republic.

Russian imperialism. This portrayal bears little resemblance to the historical figure of Bandera, who sought to create a totalitarian state and whose followers were involved in the Holocaust and the extermination of Poles in Volhynia. At the same time, scientific research on Bandera is almost non-existent, and many Ukrainians remain unaware of his true history. Russian propaganda exploits his figure to discredit Ukraine as the "Bandera state". Importantly, the glorification of the OUN-B leader and the cultural hegemony of the nationalist narrative in Ukraine's memory politics during the ongoing war serve as *stolperstein* on the path to joining the European culture of remembrance.

The Polish side's expectations that hostilities would prompt the Ukrainian authorities to adopt a more accommodating stance and agree with the Polish point of view on the tragic events of 1943–44 have also not been fulfilled. Having built a narrative of resistance to the Russian invasion around the heroisation of the UPA's struggle and the figure of Bandera, it will be extremely difficult – if not impossible – for the Ukrainian authorities to abandon their glorification.



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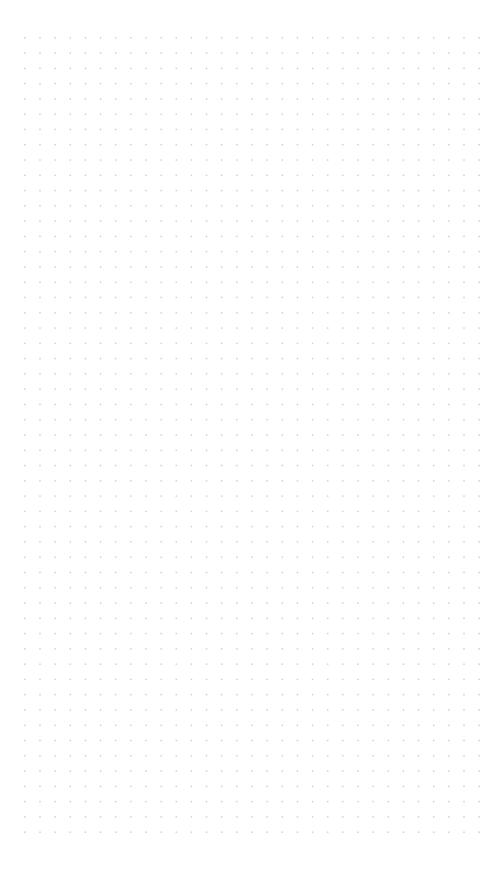
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## ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

Hanna Bazhenova is a historian, legal scholar, and political scientist with two PhDs in history. She is a senior analyst at the Eastern Department of the Institute of Central Europe and assistant professor at the Laboratory for International Memory Studies at Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin, Poland. Her main areas of interest are the history of Poland, Russia, and Ukraine; the politics of history and politics of memory; and Ukraine's domestic and foreign policy and political system.

**Rasa Čepaitienė** is a historian of culture with a PhD in history. She is a senior research fellow at the Lithuanian Institute of History, Lithuania, and an expert at the UNEC Center for Multiculturalism, Azerbaijan. Her research focuses on cultural heritage and collective memory theories, urban studies, Soviet culture, and post-Soviet transformation.

Aliaksei Lastouski is a sociologist and historian with a PhD in sociology. He is a researcher at the Center for Belarus and Regional Studies, European Humanities University, Lithuania; an affiliated researcher at the Institute for Russian and Eurasian Studies, Uppsala University, Sweden; and a senior research fellow at the Institute for Political Studies "Political Sphere", Lithuania. He is one of the organisers of the International Congresses of Belarusian Studies, held annually since 2011. His research focuses on cultural and collective memory, national identity, and cultural geography.

**Yurii Latysh** is a historian with a PhD in history. He is a visiting professor at the State University of Londrina, Brazil, and deputy editor-in-chief of *The Historical Expertise* 

(Историческая экспертиза). His research interests include memory studies, historiography, the history of Ukraine, the Decembrist movement, Perestroika, and public intellectuals.