Stepan Bandera and Ukraine's Road to War with Russia

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The question "Has anything gone wrong in Ukraine?" can be answered in many different ways. Answering it, I will apply a short-term perspective and will focus on the denial of ethnic violence as a factor leading to internal polarization, weakening of the state, and Russian aggression. The internal political and cultural polarization of Ukraine can be traced back at least to the late eighteenth century when Ukraine was divided between the Russian empire and the Habsburg empire. During the long nineteenth century, Ukrainian culture was shaped by two different polities which fostered the creation of two different mentalities. This internal division was prolonged in the interwar period, when the Ukrainians in Soviet Ukraine were exposed to different politics than were the Ukrainians in Poland. In addition, the Polish colonization of Ukraine in the fourteenth century and the domination of the Polish elites in Western Ukraine until World War II complicated the situation in these territories which in 1991 became Ukraine.

Because of this long-term cultural and political development, Ukraine can be called a country of two nations. A large Ukrainian nation lives in Central and Eastern Ukraine, formerly part of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, and a smaller one in Western Ukraine, formerly Habsburg Galicia. The first includes roughly 80 percent and the latter roughly 20 percent of the Ukrainian population. The separation of Ukraine into two nations was an important factor for the internal polarization of the country because of the different languages, mentalities, and self-understandings of the people. The nationalist and pro-European identity of the Western Ukrainians differed from the identities prevalent in Central and Eastern Ukraine. In these regions, there was a deep, centuries-old Ukrainian cultural identity, but also a Soviet Ukrainian, and for some, pro-Russian identity.

In addition to being a country of two nations, or people with two different mentalities and identities, Ukraine is also a country in which the population was exposed to many forms of violence. In the late nineteenth century, Jews were attacked in Ukrainian cities such as Odesa and Kyiv. During the Russian Civil War more than a hundred thousand Jews were killed in Central and Eastern Ukraine, the largest anti-Jewish massacre prior to the Holocaust. In 1932 and 1933 a famine in Soviet Ukraine cost the lives of more than three million Ukrainians, and many other Ukrainians were victims of other forms of Soviet terror. In the course of World War II almost seven million people were killed in Ukraine – 5.2 million were civilians, including 1.6 million Jews.

The denial of ethnic violence that I will discuss in this essay concerns the history of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), the Waffen-SS Division Galizien, and to a lesser extent also other nationalist groups and organizations that were active in Western Ukraine. OUN and UPA murdered about a hundred thousand Poles and expelled several thousand more from Western Ukraine. Members of OUN also supported the Nazis in the murder of eight hundred thousand Jews in Western Ukraine, although the Nazis did not collaborate with OUN at a political level. Between 1944 and 1950, Ukrainian nationalists fought the NKVD in a conflict that resembled a civil war. During that conflict, Soviet troops killed 153,000 Ukrainians in Western Ukraine, deported 203,000, and arrested 134,000.

The extensive violence that took place in Western Ukraine was not exceptional in this part of Europe. Other nations and communities experienced similar forms of genocidal violence. What set Ukraine apart from other East European countries was the specific denial of the violence committed by the nationalists. Ukraine differed because it was intertwined with the narrative about an anticolonial struggle for independence or for a Ukrainian state free of Russian, Soviet, Polish and other political

influences. This process of denial manifested itself in the celebration of Stepan Bandera as a national hero, freedom fighter, and victim of the Soviet Union. Although the denial of national violence is a cultural pattern and political instrument in East Central Europe and also in other parts of the world, the denial in Ukraine was exceptional in the sense that it contributed to the polarization of the political situation and that it permeated all elements of Western Ukrainian society, including journalists, historians, intellectuals, and local politicians.

But how did the denial of violence in Ukraine exacerbate the political crisis, and how did it affect and destabilize the country? Did it motivate Putin to attack Ukraine? I believe the extensive denial of the nationalist violence was both a symptom of cultural and political destabilization in the country and a factor that fostered this destabilization. It might have also contributed to Putin's decision to attack Ukraine and provided him with a justification. In the end, Putin claimed to launch a "special military operation" to eliminate a "fascist government in Kiev." But why have the Ukrainians actually denied the violence committed by the Ukrainian nationalists? Would it not have been strategically wiser to come to terms with this aspect of their history instead of denying it?

As I started to look into Bandera in the early 2000s, I did not understand that the Ukrainians in Western Ukraine and the diaspora denied the violence of the Ukrainian nationalists while commemorating Bandera. Some of them were not aware of what their actions meant. My initial perception of the Bandera commemoration was that participants were commemorating a Ukrainian political leader who fought against the Soviet Union. When I understood the connection between denial and patriotic commemorations, I was surprised by the intensity and scope of this denial. It was not only right-wing groups who denied the violence but almost the entire society, including ordinary Ukrainians, historians, and all kinds of liberal and pro-European intellectuals, politicians, and journalists. I recall a conversation with only one person in Western Ukraine who did not deny the violence and was skeptical of the Bandera cult. She felt as she did because her relatives were killed by the Ukrainian nationalists. The Bandera cult was so popular that it was not possible to have a normal conversation with almost anyone in Western Ukraine about this aspect of Ukrainian history and also about many other issues that concerned the Shoah. Bandera was not only admired in the museums and portrayed as a hero in biographies but also venerated in schools and at universities. Teachers organized competitions for the best essay about Bandera, and the students discussed in seminars the heroic nature of the "Ukrainian liberation movement" and Bandera's prominent role in it. The subject was so greatly politicized and ideologically instrumentalized that even professional, liberal historians in Western Ukraine admired Bandera and other Ukrainian nationalists or considered them a natural part of Ukrainian culture and identity. The ordinary explanation of this phenomenon was that Ukrainians commemorate Bandera not as a symbol of fascism, nationalism, violence, and antisemitism, but of the struggle for independence and resistance to Russian occupation.

The cult of Bandera goes back to the 1930s and 1940s. At that time, Bandera was admired as a leader of a fascist movement that was supposed to liberate Ukraine from Polish and Russian occupation. In 1941 Bandera was expected to become the leader of a Ukrainian state that would be ruled by OUN-B and would function in Hitler's New Europe like the Croatian and Slovakian states. Despite the proclamation, the state was not accepted by Hitler, and Bandera and some other members of OUN-B were arrested shortly afterwards and remained in custody as special political prisoners until late 1944.

The contemporary anticommunist cult of Bandera, who represented the heroic struggle for independence against the Soviet Union, appeared only after his assassination in Munich in 1959. The cult sprang up in the communities of the Ukrainian diaspora in Canada, West Germany, Australia, the USA, Great Britain, and other Western countries. The main creators and propagators of the cult were the veterans of OUN, UPA, and the Waffen-SS Galizien, who during World War II killed Poles, Jews, and "communist" Ukrainians in Western Ukraine and admired Bandera as their leader. Commemorating him as a hero, they denied and justified the criminal acts of the Ukrainian nationalists.

A similar cult of Bandera appeared in the early 1990s in Western Ukraine. It was politically and culturally very attractive for Western Ukrainian society because commemorating Bandera's assassination by the KGB in Munich in 1959 recalled the Soviet terror in Ukraine and deflected the nationalists' crimes. In contrast to these nationalist commemorations, most Ukrainians in Central and Eastern Ukraine rejected the Bandera cult because they were exposed for several decades to Soviet propaganda that portrayed the Ukrainian nationalists as enemies of the Soviet people and the Ukrainian nation and Bandera as the incarnation of treason. Because of these developments Bandera has for the most part been perceived as a villain and antihero in Central and Eastern Ukraine, at least until Putin's attack on Ukraine. Both ways of remembering Bandera mobilized large numbers of people to march and demonstrate for or against Bandera. Museums, television shows, hagiographies, music festivals, novels, and poems were the media that spread the Bandera cult and polarized Ukrainian society.

These different ways of understanding and commemorating Bandera and OUN indicate how polarized Ukrainian society was in the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s. As I started to investigate Bandera in the early 2000s, I was not entirely sure who Bandera actually was: a nationalist, freedom fighter, dissident? It took me some time to figure this out, and this was only possible by studying his life and the history of Ukrainian nationalism. Unsurprisingly, my biography of Bandera was rejected by Ukrainian historians in Western Ukraine because it confronted the society with its dark past and made clear that the society's way of commemorating Bandera is offensive to the victims of the Ukrainian nationalists.

This reaction was a strong indication that Ukrainian society was unwilling to face its past. Ukraine is not the only nation that has rejected confrontation with the dark elements of its own past, but my impression is that in the case of Ukraine it was especially strong because it was closely related to the complicated political situation within Ukraine and between Ukraine and Russia. To admit that Bandera was a leader of a fascist movement that planned to establish an ethnically homogenous state in Hitler's New Europe meant to betray Ukraine, in the sense of supporting Russian imperial policies or the "Russian" narrative of Ukrainian history. In 1991 when the Ukrainian state became a reality, about 60 percent of its population spoke Russian. Even so, Western Ukrainians and national democrats distrusted Russia, perceiving it as a threat. Hence they were reluctant to take a self-critical look at the past, lest it feed into anti-Ukrainian propaganda.

So, the Bandera cult was a sign that there was something wrong in Ukraine, and I am convinced that Ukrainian historians made a huge mistake by not investigating the history of OUN and the violence perpetrated by this movement and Ukrainian politicians by not supporting critical academic research into this subject. One reason why they refused to do it was their fear that this would support the Russian narrative about Ukrainian nationalism. Putin used the Bandera cult to claim that Ukraine is governed by a fascist regime, which was absurd, although he might have actually believed it. But the Bandera cult in Western Ukraine was also completely absurd if we consider that intellectuals in this part of Ukraine did not see any contradiction between Bandera and democracy or Bandera and human rights. For them, Bandera was a democratic politician because he fought against the Soviet Union, and his activities did not infringe upon the human rights of the people who lived in Ukraine but fostered them.

I do not know when the war in Ukraine will end, or how, but I am afraid that the Bandera cult will not disappear in Ukraine soon and will keep destabilizing the country and maybe even a part of the European continent. Putin's war apparently strengthened the cult and spread it from Western Ukraine into Central and Eastern Ukraine, although we still do not know to what extent. The number of young Ukrainian soldiers and civilians who tattooed Bandera, swastikas, and other right-wing images on their bodies has increased in recent years. Paradoxically, Ukraine's collective memory is nationalistic, apologetic, and offensive to the victims of nationalist violence, even though right-wing parties are electorally weaker in Ukraine than in most other European countries.