

Ukraine and Russia: Rewriting Histories

Written by David R. Marples

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DAVID R. MARPLES, JUN 9 2017

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The 2016 commemorations of victory in World War II illustrated the growing divide between Russia and Ukraine, one that mirrors their current conflict over Crimea and parts of eastern Ukraine. Whereas Russia celebrated the traditional 9 May Victory Day with ceremony and military swagger, in Kharkiv, Ukraine, clashes broke out between pro-Russians and young Ukrainian nationalists.[1] A rift between Ukraine and Russia has been growing for the past two years. Opinion polls show that attitudes towards Russia have changed markedly for the worse even in regions of Ukraine, traditionally friendly and Russian speaking. The change of attitude is largely a result of Russia's annexation of Crimea and its role in the conflict in eastern Ukraine, but it is also about interpretations of the past and defining national identity. World War II figures prominently as an area of acute dispute and propaganda, on both sides. Below I will discuss Ukraine's relations with Russia by analysing the decommunisation campaign in Ukraine that is under the control of the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory (UINM). The ostensible goal is to eradicate any vestiges of Communist influence in Ukraine but the programme has taken on a distinctly anti-Russian hue that will clearly have an impact on bilateral relations. The underlying question is: Could Ukraine sever relations with Russia completely, which appears to be the theme of the current changes embraced by the March 2015 'Memory Laws' and the enforced abolition of leftist political parties that originated in the Soviet period or shortly thereafter? And if so, what would be the chances of success in building a new pro-European path? Is decommunisation a valid, or even advisable route to take?

The Start of Decommunisation

Ukraine has embarked on a campaign to fulfil the so-called Memory Laws introduced in March 2015[2] to eliminate all vestiges of Communism and Nazism in Ukraine. This 'crusade', pioneered by Volodymyr Viatrovych, head of UINM, might be dismissed as secondary to the actual conflict, but the way in which it has been implemented seems guaranteed to exacerbate problems with Russia and divide Ukraine. Indeed, decommunisation is intrinsically and unabashedly directed against Russian influence in Ukraine. When the parliament passed an updated decree 'On renaming some settlements and districts' on 4 February 2016, Andrii Parubiy, Deputy Speaker of Parliament (he is now Speaker) referred to the decree on his Facebook page as 'exorcising the demons of Ruskiy Mir'.[3] Communist names, in his view, are symbols of 'humiliation and enslavement of Ukrainians'.

Viatrovych has claimed that the demand for name changes, as well as the dismantling of Soviet-era statues, first and foremost those of Lenin, is linked to changes of interpretation of the past, and particularly the perception of 'heroes' such as the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), cited in the Memory Laws as among the builders of an independent Ukraine.[4] The leaders of these organisations, particularly Stepan Bandera (leader of an extreme faction of the OUN from 1940), are to acquire streets in their names in all major cities of Ukraine.

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For example, in Kyiv, the new Bandera Street will replace Moskovskiy Avenue (it also houses the Russian Embassy!). The avenue of General Mykola Vatutin, who was assassinated by Ukrainian nationalists, is to be known as Roman Shukhevych Avenue, thereby commemorating the leader of the assassins. The anti-Russian symbolism of the change could hardly be missed. Viatrovych insists that disputes over the past between Ukraine and Russia are not simply arguments but military confrontations because 'today's Russia is built on imperialism'.

At the same time, the local role is limited to discussing names proposed by UINM, not alternatives or retention of the original name. The UINM encountered a problem with Kirovohrad (named after Sergey Kirov, who was leader of Leningrad until he was assassinated in late 1934), where according to a poll of April 2016[5] a majority of citizenry (56.9%) prefers to keep the current name, 30.6% want the former name of Ielysavethrad (after Saint Elizabeth, i.e. former Empress of Russia and thus offensive to Viatrovych), and only 4.2% back Kropyvnytskyi, the name recommended by the profile committee of the Parliament.

One of the suppositions of decommunisation is that in a few areas of Ukraine, and especially Donbas, a '*sovok*' mentality prevails. The term is derogatory and refers to those people indoctrinated by the Soviet Union that have retained the former Soviet mindset. By implication it is an 'incorrect' attitude, and Viatrovych and others regard it as something that needs to be eradicated. Haran and analyst Sviatoslav Pavliuk agree that: '*sovok* dwells not in monuments to Lenin, but in our motivations and actions'.[6]

Interviewed on Ukraine's Channel 5 (3 May 2016), Viatrovych declared that: 'occupied Donbas is an island of *sovok*, and *sovok* is the main reason behind the war that happened there.' He believes that Donbas is a successful example of the Soviet-era attempts to create a 'Soviet Man'. Donbas and Ukraine represent two different worlds, in his view: one that tries to live in the 1970s and 1980s and one that has returned to its 'national, religious, and European roots'. The isolated community of *sovok* in Donbas presages the 'beginning of the end of Russia in its present form'.[7]

It would be difficult to find a more emphatic dismissal of a region that only four years ago was Ukraine's most powerful economic sector, the leaders of which comprised most of the Cabinet of Ministers. Even in the late Soviet period, however, Ukrainian leaders, who were starting to assert their authority, recognised the importance of autonomy in Crimea and Donetsk region in particular (for example the presidential candidate I.R. Yuhnovskiy in Donetsk in October 1991).[8] It is facile to assert that Donbas is simply representative of the Soviet past or that the views of some residents should be dismissed outright.

Defects of Decommunisation

On 24 February 2016, German historian Karl Schloegel commented that the dangerous aspect of the Ukrainian approach to decommunisation was the monopolist position of the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory, which has too much control over a process that should be pluralistic and involve the general public, historians, and academic institutions. It is essential in his view 'not to turn decommunisation or desovietisation into a battleground for political games and not to enforce it from top to bottom'.[9] Yet that is precisely what appears to be happening, with threats increasing to those mayors (including incidentally Kyiv's Vitalii Klychko) who make arguments in favour of the retention of monuments of artistic value.

On a broader level, decommunisation has resulted in a ban not only on the Communist Party, which failed to gain representation in Parliament in the most recent elections, but also the Socialist Party (only created in late 1991 after the Communist Party was banned) because of alleged violations of the law banning totalitarian symbols, which were the subject of an analysis by a commission of the Ministry of Justice. The Commission reached the conclusion that the party programme falls within the new regulations, but the party symbols, which include the hammer and sickle, represent a violation. The conclusion was based on the 'expertise' of the Ukrainian Heraldic Society headed by Andrii Hrechko.[10]

Finally, it is stating the obvious to assert that the campaign is removing some items of artistic value, which are linked irrevocably to the history of 20th century Ukraine, however tragic that history may be. Vandalism and destruction have superseded reason and discussion.[11] The equation of Soviet Communism with German National Socialism,

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including in the Memory Laws of May 2015, signifies that only the complete eradication of memory is contemplated. The naïve premise appears to be that by removing the symbols and remnants of Soviet power, popular memories will be eradicated. They are to be replaced by monuments, city and street names of heroes, including 1930s and wartime integral nationalists, the very names of which are anathema to Ukrainians in some regions.

Critics, internal and external, are not to be tolerated. One response to the Open Letter to Poroshenko and Hroisman – which implored the Ukrainian authorities to reconsider acceptance of the Memory Laws because of the potential threat to historical inquiry – was to accuse the signatories (in a letter to Education Minister Serhii Kvit) of being agents of the Russian Secret Service.[12] Another, from Viatrovych himself in the online *Krytyka*,[13] maintained that other states in former Communist Europe had taken similar measures and that the opponents of the laws were in close harmony with the Russified leaders of the DNR and LNR, and thus did not merit a vote.

Such sensitivity borders on the neurotic, as does a recent ban by Ukraine on foreign journalists who received accreditation from the leaders of the breakaway regimes in order to report the conflict.[14] Without their reporting it is doubtful whether news about the war would have reached the Western media. At a similar level was the overreaction to former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's support for the Russian seizure of Crimea – a five-year ban from entering Ukraine.[15] Gorbachev is 85 years of age and has made public statements both for and against the Putin presidency, but he has little influence in Russia where he remains highly unpopular. Authoritarian measures are sometimes justifiable in a time of warfare, but neither the reporters nor Gorbachev pose threats to Ukraine.

Conclusion

At this stage of the Viatrovych-led programme, an observer might question the methods used to introduce changes, which are imposed from above, with minimal discussions, and as historian Georgiy Kasianov notes,[16] reminiscent ironically of the way in which Communist names were imposed earlier. One goal, which is frequently stated explicitly, is to move Ukraine away from Russia and eliminate any vestiges of symbols of cooperation, with perhaps the sole remaining exceptions being the Rodina-Mat (Motherland) monument and the Museum of the Second World War. Another is to glorify two nationalist movements representative of a small area of western Ukraine – the imposition of a regional narrative to the entire history of the country, which is both misleading and divisive. Regions of Ukraine have their own singular histories and what is lacking is a unifying narrative and common 'heroes' during a time of prolonged crisis.

The discipline of history, also, has never been black and white; there is no single correct version of events, and the attempt to construct one, depicting Russia as the evil 'other', represents a mode of thinking ironically as one-sided as the earlier Soviet interpretations. Whereas Russia is conducting a hybrid war against Ukraine, UINM has responded with a propaganda war that not only attempts to cleanse the country of all Soviet remnants, but also, it now appears, anything linked to Russia.

Decommunisation is thus a means to take Ukraine out of the Russian orbit and to create and infuse a new nationalist mind-set. It is not unique, since similar practices have taken root in Poland and the Czech Republic, and other states. But it will of necessity alienate many residents of Ukraine who do not share the new official views about the past. Moreover, the anti-Russian framework is expressly linked to the current conflict in the east rather than a carefully constructed programme that takes into account the diverse strands of modern Ukrainian identity. In this respect, it is dangerously narrow.

One other aspect needs to be emphasised in conclusion. Removing Nazi symbols and monuments after 1945 helped to foster democratic changes in a Europe that was predominantly fascist or authoritarian. Removing Communist symbols in Ukraine in 2015-16 might have a similar intent, but not if the end result is to construct heroes out of leaders of the OUN, which was highly authoritarian, emphasised a 'Ukraine for Ukrainians', and followed a figure in Bandera who adhered to these principles long after the war had ended. This is not the path to democracy or the European Union but a reversion to the ideology of the 1930s and 1940s. It failed then as it will fail today. In short, it is a 'road to nowhere'.

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Notes

- [1] <http://www.dw.com/en/russian-victory-day-prompts-clashes-in-kharkiv-kyiv/a-19244215>
- [2] <http://www.memory.gov.ua/laws/law-ukraine-legal-status-and-honoring-memory-fighters-ukraines-independence-twentieth-century>
- [3] <http://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/27532795.html>
- [4] <http://www.memory.gov.ua/laws/law-ukraine-legal-status-and-honoring-memory-fighters-ukraines-independence-twentieth-century>
- [5] <http://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2016/04/18/7105908/>
- [6] <http://www.radiosvoboda.org/content/article/27710695.html>
- [7] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yfAUlrUazZE>
- [8] See Anatolii Yeremenko, "Nashli vzaymoponimanie," *Pravda Ukrainy*, October 12, 1991, p. 2.
- [9] <http://www.dw.com/uk/> (24 February 2014).
- [10] <http://novynarnia.com/2016/04/22/min-yust-ne-zatverdiv-komunistichnu-simvoliku-rozkolotoyi-sotspartiyi/>
- [11] <https://www.facebook.com/soviet.mosaics.ua/posts/897752127003905>
- [12] <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/05/02/the-historian-whitewashing-ukraines-past-volodymyr-viatrovych/>
- [13] <https://krytyka.com/en/solutions/opinions/decommunisation-and-academic-discussion>
- [14] <https://cpj.org/2015/09/ukraine-bans-41-international-journalists-and-blog.php>
- [15] <http://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2016/05/27/7109860/>
- [16] <http://life.pravda.com.ua/society/2016/05/7/211912/>

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