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Guest Editors:

Yuliya Yurchuk and Andreas Umland



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Special Section

**Issues in the History and Memory of the  
OUN VI**

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# Introduction

## Reassessing Ukrainian Nationalism in the Light of Russia's Full-Scale Invasion since 2022\*

Yuliya Yurchuk and Andreas Umland

This special section is the sixth installment in a series of thematic sections of research papers on the memory and history of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and the OUN Bandera-wing's military arm, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (Ukr. abbrev.: UPA). In this series, scholars of different disciplines share findings from their research on interwar and war-time Ukrainian radical nationalism as well as its contemporary public and scholarly interpretations or presentations within various forms of remembrance.<sup>1</sup> The

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\* We are very grateful to Julie Fedor for her extremely careful and patient final editing of the contributions to this special section including this introduction. A whole number of anonymous peer-reviewers provided useful feedback on the research papers in this section, for which we are also very grateful.

1 Per Anders Rudling, "Yushchenko's Fascist: The Bandera Cult in Ukraine and Canada," Yaroslav Hrytsak, "Ukrainian Memory Culture Post-1991: The Case of Stepan Bandera," Yuliya Yurchuk, "Rivne's Memory of Taras Bul'ba-Borovets': A Regional Perspective on the Formation of the Founding Myth of the UPA," and Lukasz Adamski, "Kyiv's 'Volhynian Negationism': Reflections on the 2016 Polish-Ukrainian Memory Conflict," *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* 3, no. 2 (2017): 129-290; Ivan Gomza, "Catalytic Mobilization of Radical Ukrainian Nationalists in the Second Polish Republic: The Impact of Political Opportunity Structure," Igor Barinov, "Allies or Collaborators? The Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists and Nazi Germany during the Occupation of Ukraine in 1941-43," Myroslav Shkandrij, "Volodymyr Viatrovych's Second Polish-Ukrainian War," John-Paul Himka, "Correspondence," *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* 4, no. 2 (2018): 35-132; Kai Struve, "The OUN(b), the Germans, and Anti-Jewish Violence in Eastern Galicia during Summer 1941," Yuri Radchenko, "The Biography of the OUN(m) Activist Oleksa Babii in the Light of His 'Memoirs on Escaping Execution' (1942)," Tomislav Dulić and



third 2020 special section on the OUN's and UPA's relationship to German Nazism coincided with the start of a separate series of JSPPS special sections under the title "A Debate on 'Ustashism', Generic Fascism and the OUN," also continued in the previous issue of *JSPPS*.<sup>2</sup>

Our 2017, 2018, 2020 and 2021 introductions to the sections "Issues in the History and Memory of the OUN" reflected on topical events in Ukraine at these points in time, as well as on ongoing memory production and historical debates related to historic Ukrainian radical nationalism. In this way, we briefly chronicled and contextualized Ukraine's peculiarly evolving *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past) after the Euromaidan Revolution.<sup>3</sup> Below we continue this chronicle of recent developments in Ukraine's memory affairs.

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Goran Miljan, "The Ustašas and Fascism: 'Abolitionism,' Revolution, and Ideology (1929–42)," *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* 6, no. 1 (2020): 205–306; Grzegorz Motyka, "NKVD Internal Troops Operations against the Ukrainian Insurgent Army in 1944–45," Oksana Myshlovska, "History Education and Reconciliation: The Ukrainian National Underground Movement in Secondary School Curricula, Textbooks, and Classroom Practices in Ukraine (1991–2012)," Marian Luschnat-Ziegler, "Observing Trends in Ukrainian Memory Politics (2014–2019) through Structural Topic Modeling," *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* 7, no. 1 (2021): 17–110; Oleksandr Melnyk, "Ukrainian Nationalism, Soviet Power, and Legitimacy Contests in the Kyiv Region, 1941–44: Actors, Issues, and Interpretations," Per Anders Rudling, "Managing Memory in Post-Soviet Ukraine: From 'Scientific Marxism-Leninism' to the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory, 1991–2019," *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* 7, no. 2 (2021): 21–135.

- 2 *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* 7, nos. 1 & 2 (2021) and 9, no. 1 (2023).
- 3 Andreas Umland and Yuliya Yurchuk, "The Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) in Post-Soviet Ukrainian Memory Politics, Public Debates, and Foreign Affairs," *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* 3, no. 2 (2017): 115–28, [spps-jspps.autorenbetreuung.de/files/umland\\_yurchuk\\_3\\_2.pdf](https://spps-jspps.autorenbetreuung.de/files/umland_yurchuk_3_2.pdf) (accessed 16 April 2018); *idem*, "Essays in the Historical Interpretation of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalist," *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* 4, no. 2 (2018): 29–34, [spps-jspps.autorenbetreuung.de/files/yurchuk\\_umland\\_jspps\\_4\\_2\\_2.pdf](https://spps-jspps.autorenbetreuung.de/files/yurchuk_umland_jspps_4_2_2.pdf) (accessed 26 January 2020); *idem*, "The Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists and European Fascism During World War II," *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* 6, no. 1 (2020): 181–204, [spps-jspps.autorenbetreuung.de/files/06-01-jspps-intro\\_02.pdf](https://spps-jspps.autorenbetreuung.de/files/06-01-jspps-intro_02.pdf); *idem*, "New Studies on the Record and Remembrance of the OUN(b) in World War II," *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* 7, no. 2 (2021): 13–20,

In our last introduction of early 2020, we noted that the election of Volodymyr Zelens'kyi as President of Ukraine and departure of the incumbent Petro Poroshenko, contrary to some observers' expectations, had not resulted in a radical change of Ukrainian memory approaches with regard to the OUN. We wrote that the new director of the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance (Ukr. abbrev.: UINP) Anton Drobovych—now serving at the frontline—changed only moderately the vector of the Institute's work by way of including less controversial topics into the memory agenda since his appointment in December 2019.<sup>4</sup>

A radical change in memory political agenda was triggered neither by the change of Ukraine's leadership nor by the appointment of a new UINP director in 2019. Instead, the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, on 24 February 2022, rebooted the political and even geopolitical context of Ukrainian memory affairs. This unprovoked war on the European continent in the 21<sup>st</sup> century constitutes not only an attack on Ukraine but—with its new annexations and genocidal aspects—also on the world's post-World War II security system.<sup>5</sup> By mid-2023, the war has already claimed the lives of more than a hundred thousand people in Ukraine and made 14 million Ukrainian citizens into temporarily or permanently, internally or externally displaced persons.

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[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/363711509\\_Introduction\\_New\\_Studies\\_on\\_the\\_Record\\_and\\_Remembrance\\_of\\_the\\_OUNb\\_during\\_World\\_War\\_II](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/363711509_Introduction_New_Studies_on_the_Record_and_Remembrance_of_the_OUNb_during_World_War_II).

- 4 On the memory agenda of the Institute's previous director Volodymyr Viatrovych, see in JSPPS: Shkandrij, "Volodymyr Viatrovych's Second Polish-Ukrainian War." For a Polish reaction to a provocative 2017 Facebook post by Viatrovych, see, for example: Krzysztof Janiga, "Duda obok zbrodniarza z UPA na fotomontażu szefa ukraińskiego IPN," *Kresy.pl*, 3 July 2017, [kresy.pl/wydarzenia/spoleczenstwo/duda-obok-zbrodniarza-upa-fotomontazu-szefa-ukrainskiego-ipn/](https://kresy.pl/wydarzenia/spoleczenstwo/duda-obok-zbrodniarza-upa-fotomontazu-szefa-ukrainskiego-ipn/).
- 5 Andreas Umland, "Chy potribno zmushchuvaty Kyiv obminiuvaty zemliu na myr?" *Ukrains'ka Pravda*, 13 July 2023, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/columns/2023/07/13/74u088/>.

## Russia's Invasion and the "Decolonial Turn" in Ukrainian Remembrance

To be sure, Russia's invasion of Ukraine did not change, in principle, the approach to memory affairs by the Ukrainian President, his administration, and his government. Like in 2019 when he came to power, Volodymyr Zelens'kyi's main approach to history in July 2023, when we write this text, has changed little under the influence of the war. He remains somewhat indifferent to historical themes, and continues to emphasize his orientation towards the future. In an interview with Anne Applebaum, when she asked about his thoughts on Putin's obvious preoccupations with the past, Zelens'kyi replied: "I don't love the past. We have to jump forward. Not back."<sup>6</sup>

Although Zelens'kyi's attitude has thus not changed much, the landscape of memory activism in Ukraine has been evolving since February 2022. New actors in Ukraine's domestic history politics have emerged. There have also been changes in Kyiv's mnemonic policies on the international arena. Some older, already existent themes in Ukrainian remembrance have gained new salience.

After the invasion, a number of hitherto less prominent actors have become visible memory entrepreneurs with their own mnemonic agendas. This concerns, for example, the Ukrainian Institute (UI)—a Ukrainian government agency founded in 2017 and originally tasked with "cultural diplomacy" rather than issues of remembrance. The UI is not to be confused with the above-mentioned UINP.

In recent months, the UI, equipped with relevant funding, has taken a leading role in promoting more strongly than before an approach to Ukraine's past, within Kyiv's foreign affairs, that emphasizes the topic of decolonization.<sup>7</sup> The original mission of the UI could itself be read through a decolonial lens: Strengthening Ukraine

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6 As quoted in: Anne Applebaum and Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Counteroffensive," *The Atlantic*, June 2023: 16–31, here 21.

7 See "Programmes and Projects," *UI official website*, <https://ui.org.ua/en/projects/>.

internationally and domestically as an independent and visible subject using the tools of cultural diplomacy.<sup>8</sup>

To be sure, the UINP had worked on the topic of decolonization already before 2017 and has more recently also done so. For instance, just a few months before Russia's large-scale invasion, at the end of 2021, the UINP initiated a series of roundtables dedicated to the questions of decolonization. They were designed to debunk "Russian imperial myths," as the UINP stated. These roundtable discussions took place in Kharkiv, Dnipro, Odesa, and Kyiv.<sup>9</sup> Yet, it was the UI rather than UINP that has, during the first 18 months of the large-scale war with Russia, spread discussions on decolonization both to local and international arenas.<sup>10</sup> In this way, the decolonizing discourse has now become a central part of Ukrainian cultural diplomacy across the world.

Post- and decolonial approaches to the study of historical memory had, of course, been used by scholars within academic historical and cultural studies for decades before they started to become popularized among the wider public by such institutions as UINP and UI.<sup>11</sup> The decolonial approaches used in academia and memory

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8 "Mission," *UI official website*, <https://ui.org.ua/en/mission-2/> (accessed 8 August 2023).

9 Report for 2021, *UINP*, <https://uinp.gov.ua/pro-instytut/zvity/zvit-za-2021-rik> (accessed 7 July 2023).

10 A list of publications on decolonization published after the start of the Russian full-fledged invasion of Ukraine was compiled by the UI and can be found here: <https://ui.org.ua/en/sectors-en/decolonization-selected-articles-published-in-the-aftermath-of-russias-invasion-of-ukraine/> (accessed 7 July 2023). There are also several video recordings of discussions in different cities.

11 As the topic for our issue is the history and memory of OUN and UPA, we will not elaborate here on the differences between the postcolonial and decolonial. Suffice to mention that these approaches have different epistemological grounds. The postcolonial approach is more widely used in memory studies of Ukraine. See, for example, Yuliya Yurchuk, *Reordering of Meaningful Words. The Memory of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army in Post-Soviet Ukraine* (Lund University, 2014); Barbara Törnquist-Plewa and Yuliya Yurchuk, "Memory Politics in Contemporary Ukraine: Reflections from the Post-Colonial Perspective," *Memory Studies* 2, no. 6 (2019): 699–720; Maryna Shevtsova, "Looking for Stepan Bandera: The Myth of Ukrainian Nationalism and the Russian 'Special Operation,'" *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies* 16, no. 3 (2022): 132–50; Vitaliy Chernetsky,

activism have many similarities—above all, the aim to reclaim a national history that was suppressed or silenced. Yet, one can nevertheless distinguish between scholarly and political usage of this approach. The former employs a post- or decolonial approach as a method of historical knowledge production focusing on “local epistemologies” and highlighting Ukrainian subjectivity.<sup>12</sup> The latter, in contrast, implements “decolonization” as a strategy of liberation. That said, it does not mean that these two usages never overlap. As the current Russian aggression is an imperial war, Ukraine is conducting an anti-colonial struggle. Its decolonial historical narratives evolve in and outside academia in the context of this war.

On 21 March 2023, the President of Ukraine signed the Law “On condemning and banning propaganda of Russian imperialist politics in Ukraine and the decolonization of toponyms.” The law came into force on 27 July 2023. It has legalized and formalized an anti-imperial grassroots movement that emerged shortly after the start of Russia’s large-scale invasion, and became known as *Pushkinopad* (Pushkinfall). The term is derived from the earlier *Leninopad* (Leninfall) that began in December 2013, during the Revolution of Dignity, when the Lenin monument on Kyiv’s Besarabs’ka Square was toppled.

### Anti-Imperial Memory Goes Mainstream

According to a survey conducted by Kyiv’s reputed Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation in December 2022, about 59% of the Ukrainian population are in favor of renaming the toponyms that bear names of Soviet and Russian figures. In 2020, only about 30%

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*Mapping Post-Communist Cultures: Russia and Ukraine in the Context of Globalization* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007); Tamara Hundorova, *Tran-sytna kul’tura: symptomy postkolonial’noi travmy* (Hrani-T, 2013); Marko Pavlyshyn, *Kanon ta ikonostas: Literaturno-krytychni statti* (“Chas,” 1997). On decolonization and memory: Olena Betlii, “The Identity Politics of Heritage: Decommunization, Decolonization and Derussification of Kyiv Monuments after Russia’s Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine,” *Journal of Applied History* 4 (2022): 149–69.

12 Madina Tlostanova, *Gender Epistemologies and Eurasian Borderlands* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

supported such renaming.<sup>13</sup> These poll results, together with the spontaneous toppling of monuments to Russian historical figures after the invasion, illustrate a shift in historical perceptions among the broader Ukrainian public. Attitudes to the past that were mainly characteristic of the Western regions have now also spread to other regions of Ukraine. At the same time, the toppling of monuments continues to be characterized by regional specificities. For instance, in Odesa, where a monument to Russian Emperor Catharine the Great was toppled in December 2022, the monument to Soviet Marshal Rodion Malinovsky remained in place. A monument to Pushkin was boarded up to protect it from the bombing. Odesa's main monument to Lenin had, already in 2015, been transformed into a presentation of Darth Vader, the villain from George Lucas' famous fantasy movie series *Star Wars*.<sup>14</sup>

Among others, a dramatic shift in popular attitudes to history occurred in relation to the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, UPA. In late April 2022, i.e., roughly two months after Russia's large-scale invasion had begun, according to a survey conducted by the reputed polling agency Rating Group, 81% considered the OUN-UPA to be fighters for Ukrainian independence. In comparison to a similar measurement of 2010, this positive assessment had thus quadrupled, and, in comparison to 2015, it had doubled.<sup>15</sup>

After the start of Russia's large-scale invasion, the support for renaming toponyms in honor of people who have been recently or

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13 "Zasudzhennia SRSR, derusyfikatsiia, Maidan—iak zminuet'sia stavlennia ukrainsiv do polityky natsional'noi pamiaty na tli rosiis'koi ahresii," *Fond Demokratychni initsiatyvy imeni Il'ka Kucheriva*, 20 January 2023. <https://dif.org.ua/article/zasudzhennya-srsr-derusyfikatsiya-maydan-yak-zminyetsya-stavlennya-ukrainsiv-do-politiki-natsionalnoi-pamyati-na-tli-rosiyskoi-agresii>.

14 Yuliya Yurchuk, "De-Canonization of the Soviet Past: Abject, Kitsch, and Memory," *De-Commemoration: Removing Statues and Renaming Places*, eds. Sarah Gensburger and Jenny Wüstenberg (Berghahn, 2023), 106–13.

15 "Desiate zahal'nonatsional'ne opytuvannia: Ideolohichni markery viiny (27 kvitnia 2022)," *Rating Group*, 3 May 2022, [https://ratinggroup.ua/research/ukraine/desyaty\\_obschenatsionalnyy\\_opros\\_ideologicheskije\\_markery\\_voyny\\_27\\_aprelya\\_2022.html](https://ratinggroup.ua/research/ukraine/desyaty_obschenatsionalnyy_opros_ideologicheskije_markery_voyny_27_aprelya_2022.html) (accessed 7 July 2023).

are currently defending Ukraine has become overwhelming. According to Rating Group, 92% of Ukrainians support such relabeling.<sup>16</sup> New monuments are being built in memory of people associated with Ukraine's resistance against Russia. This trend, to be sure, started already in summer 2014 when soldiers who had fallen in the early stages of the Donbas War started to be publicly commemorated throughout Ukraine. This new form of war-related remembrance often went in parallel to and connection with commemoration of the protestors killed during the Revolution of Dignity in early 2014.<sup>17</sup>

As a result, one can observe the emergence of new "memory node" taking a central place in Ukraine's national mnemonic canon. These and similar trends could lead, in the future, to a partial shift away from the previous war-related focus on memorializing the Second World War, OUN, and UPA. Such a novel frame of remembrance has the potential to be more consensual and less divisive than the various forms of memory inherited from the Soviet period.

### Debating and Re-assessing the OUN(b)

This special section contains two articles. Per Anders Rudling's broad survey "Benderites, UkroNazis and *Rashizm*: Studying the Historical Ukrainian Far Right in Times of Disinformation and Hybrid Warfare" discusses, among other topics, various (mis)uses of the term "fascism" in Ukraine and Russia in the context of an escalating war. While Ukraine sees Russia as a fascist state, Russia has used an allegedly rising fascism/Nazism in Ukraine as a *casus belli* to justify its aggression against Ukraine. Rudling points out that, in today's Ukraine, the memory of the OUN and UPA fades as the current war

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16 "Chetverte zahal'nonatsional'ne opytuvannia ukraintsi v umovakh viiny (12-13 bereznia 2020)," *Rating Group*, 15 March 2022, [https://ratinggroup.ua/research/ukraine/chetvertyy\\_obschenacionalnyy\\_opros\\_ukraincev\\_v\\_usloviyah\\_voyny\\_12-13\\_marta\\_2022\\_goda.html](https://ratinggroup.ua/research/ukraine/chetvertyy_obschenacionalnyy_opros_ukraincev_v_usloviyah_voyny_12-13_marta_2022_goda.html) (accessed 11 July 2023).

17 Serhy Yekelchuk, "The Heavenly Hundred: Fallen Heroes of the Euromaidan in Post-Revolutionary Ukraine," *The Political Cult of the Dead in Ukraine. Traditions and Dimensions from the First World War to Today*, eds. Guido Hausmann and Iryna Sklokina (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2021), 273–98.

provides ever more occasions for reflection and commemoration, at both the state and the grassroots levels.

Jakub Bornio's article "The Polish–Ukrainian Dispute over the Volhynian Massacres: Investigating the Logic Behind the Polish Narrative" analyzes historical politics in Poland in relation to the Polish–Ukrainian dispute over the killing of Volhynian Poles by Ukrainian nationalists in the early 1940s.<sup>18</sup> Bornio argues that far-right opposition pressure framed current Polish memory of this historical event and its characterization as a genocide of the Polish people. The shifts in memory politics in Poland relate to both internal political struggles and responses to foreign affairs. The latter concerns, not the least, developments in Ukraine including Kyiv's policy of heroization of Ukrainian ultra-nationalism and its iconic leaders during World War II. After Volodymyr Zelens'kyi—who has no elaborate memory agenda—became President of Ukraine in 2019, Polish reactions to Ukrainian historical debates and memory policies weakened markedly.

One could add to the observations by Bornio that, in summer 2023, as we write this introduction, a shift in the public commemoration of the Volhynian Massacre seems to be underway. In July 2023, on the occasion of the 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Volhynian crime, the Presidents of Poland and Ukraine, Andrzej Duda and Volodymyr Zelens'kyi, took jointly part in a mass and commemoration of Volhynian victims in the West Ukrainian city of Luts'k.<sup>19</sup> This memorial event served as an occasion for Ukraine's leadership to express its gratitude for Polish solidarity with Ukraine in its current dark period. During this year's anniversary of the Volhynian Massacre, Polish authorities also started openly demanding permission to

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18 We are aware that the phrase Volhynian Poles is not precise as the massacres took place in other regions too and that Poles were not the only victims. But these events are commonly referred to as the "Volhynian crime" or the "Volhynian massacres" and in the debates it is presented as the killing of Poles by Ukrainian nationalists, so we use this simplified denomination.

19 Natalka Lotots'ka, "Zelens'kyi i Duda berut' uchast' u zhalobnii mesi u Luts'komu kosteli," *Livyi Bereh*, 9 July 2023, [https://lb.ua/society/2023/07/09/564329\\_zelenskiy\\_i\\_duda\\_berut\\_uchast.html](https://lb.ua/society/2023/07/09/564329_zelenskiy_i_duda_berut_uchast.html) (accessed 11 July 2023).