

Unravelling Ukraine: Interview with Historian Marta Havryshko

Saturday 28 December 2024, by [BĚLIČEK Ondřej](#), [HAVRYSHKO Marta](#) (Date first published: 11 December 2024).

In this exclusive interview, Ukrainian historian Marta Havryshko sheds light on the complex and controversial history of Ukraine during World War II. She discusses the role of Ukrainian nationalists in collaborating with the Nazis, the myths surrounding Stepan Bandera, and the far right's influence on modern Ukraine's politics of memory. As Russia's invasion has dramatically radicalised Ukrainian society, Havryshko argues that ethno-nationalist narratives of WWII now prevail, glorifying Ukrainian Nazi collaborators as heroes while silencing critical voices.

The Motives Behind Ukraine's Collaboration with Nazi Germany

During World War II, Ukraine was the site of the most brutal fighting as well as the most extensive extermination of Jews and Slavic people. To what extent did Ukrainian inhabitants collaborate with the Nazis in the extermination of the Jewish population?

The main motives for political collaboration was the idea that Hitler could restore Ukraine as an independent state. The **Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN)**, formed in 1929, relied heavily on this idea.

The OUN maintained ties to the **Wehrmacht** and **NSDAP**, receiving training and informational support. They believed that expressing loyalty to Nazi Germany would lead to an independent Ukrainian state. Many Ukrainian nationalists continued collaborating with the Nazis even after their leaders were imprisoned, in order to access power, weapons, and military training. They directly participated in the Holocaust by guarding Jews, transporting them to killing sites, engaging in direct killings, hunting them down in hiding places, and handing them over to the Germans.

Antisemitism also played an important role in political collaboration. The concept of Judeo-Bolshevism [1], which collectively blamed Jews for Soviet crimes in Ukraine, was popular among Ukrainian nationalists. The German occupation, which shared the same sentiments towards Jews, was portrayed as an ally that could help the Ukrainian people get rid of Jews and their alleged power.

The Role and Legacy of Stepan Bandera

You mentioned Stepan Bandera. Can you tell us more about his role during World War II?

Stepan Bandera was obsessed with the idea of creating a Ukrainian state. He believed that Nazi Germany would support Ukrainian aspirations, but instead ended up imprisoned for most of the German-Soviet war. He did not directly participate in the war crimes of the **OUN** and its military wing, the **Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA)**, but never explicitly condemned them either, bearing responsibility as the leader of the OUN.

Soviet propaganda greatly contributed to the Bandera myth, even more than his own political activities. After Ukraine's independence, Bandera became immensely popular in western Ukraine. Efforts to rehabilitate him intensified after Russia's 2022 invasion, with state and non-state memory actors portraying him as a symbol of Ukraine's current resistance against Russian aggression.

Wartime Remembrance Under Communism and Its Aftermath

How was World War II remembered under the communist regime? We already mentioned Bandera, but what about the role of Ukrainians during the genocide of the Jewish population? Was it a taboo subject?

In the Soviet era, the myth of the "Great Patriotic War" was created. Part of this myth was the complete denial of the **Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact**, which divided Poland, the Baltic states, and Finland between Nazi Germany and the USSR. Another key pillar of this myth was the creation of the concept of "peaceful Soviet citizens" as collective victims of Nazi Germany, which overshadowed the Holocaust as a specific Jewish component of Nazi killings.

The result of this distortion of Ukrainian history was that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the opposite extreme occurred. Many began to "rehabilitate" the history of the Ukrainian nationalist movement during WWII. New myths began to spread.

These new myths justified the ethnic cleansing of Poles and collaboration with the Nazis. Participation in anti-Jewish violence was portrayed as following orders from the German occupiers in a situation of lawlessness. However, we know that Ukrainian nationalists participated in pogroms against Jews even before the arrival of the Nazis, when the **Red Army** retreated and the vacuum of legal power created new opportunities for extremists and opportunists.

The Far Right's Influence on Post-Maidan Ukraine

Do you think that far-right groups took advantage of the opportunity during the events on the Maidan and imposed their ideology on Ukrainian society?

Yes, I am convinced that Maidan allowed ultra-nationalists to seize memory politics in Ukraine. They began to push an ultra-nationalist narrative. From the beginning, many people were not in favour of this narrative. Many opposed it. They did not want monuments and streets of Bandera and **Shukhevych** in their cities.

These contradictions over the Soviet legacy deepened further after the 2023 launch of "de-colonisation", essentially removing all traces of the Russian heritage present in Ukraine. By destroying this memory, Ukraine liquidated an important part of its own history, becoming less diverse, inclusive and more ethno-nationalist and myth-centric.

Glorifying Nazi Collaborators in Wartime Ukraine

After the Russian invasion in 2022, many things changed dramatically. Would you say that a far-right narrative about World War II now prevails in Ukrainian society?

The 2022 Russian invasion dramatically radicalised Ukrainian society. Many became interested in the roots of Russian imperialism and resistance to it. Therefore, the history of the OUN and UPA became the core of nationalist memory as an example of uncompromising struggle and sacrifice for Ukrainian independence. This memory is full of myths and silencing of inconvenient issues that do not fit into the heroic narrative.

Moreover, this memory downplays collaboration with the Nazis during World War II as the “lesser evil”. Therefore, not only members of the Ukrainian national underground are celebrated, but also members of military units created by the Nazis who swore allegiance to Hitler and fought for the interests of Nazi Germany. I am referring to the **Waffen-SS Galicia** division, involved in anti-partisan punitive actions in Slovakia and Slovenia in 1944.

When I criticised all these disturbing developments related to the celebration of Nazi collaborators, I was subjected to harassment, persecuted, smeared, and received death threats.

Freedom of speech has become a luxury in war-torn Ukraine, where ethno-nationalist historical myths are at the core of war propaganda. Most Ukrainians cannot afford to criticise memory politics out of fear of being accused of spreading “Russian propaganda” and “collaborating with the enemy”, which could mean trial and imprisonment.

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[2] Judeo-Bolshevism was an antisemitic conspiracy theory that alleged Jewish domination of the Bolshevik party and Soviet government, and that communism was a Jewish plot.

P.S.

Source

<https://denikalarm.cz/2024/12/etnonacionalisticke-historicke-myty-se-staly-jadrem-ukrajinske-valecne-propagandy-rika-marta-havryshko/>

Translated from Czech by Adam Novak

Footnotes

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