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THE UKRAINIAN LIBERATION MOVEMENT IN THE INTERWAR PERIOD (1923–1939)

It is extremely difficult to conceptualize the complexities of the Ukrainian component during the interwar period, despite the relatively short timeframe involved. We see this in the current historical discussion, which mostly is taking place in mass media, as an integral part of the current political discourse. We have two main problems concerning methodology. The first one – contemporary political correctness is often used to interpret the events of the interwar period and the Second World War, even though the political context has changed dramatically since 1945. The second problem is related to long standing traditions of Russian propaganda, which under Putin’s guidance have gained renewed strength through fake news and historical revisionism that can be described as hybrid post-truth informational aggression on a global scale.

The key point in Putin’s propaganda intrusion into history is the thesis that the modern Ukrainian state is not the result of the Ukrainians’ struggle for independence, but is a consequence of the “evolution” of the Soviet system. Accordingly, an independent Ukraine was produced completely by accident in 1991. However, to arrive at this conclusion the logical sequence of events had to be changed. While, in fact, the collapse of the Soviet Union was largely caused by the unwillingness of Ukrainians to live in the evil empire, the neo-Soviet school of history attempts to present Ukrainian efforts to gain independence in a peculiarly racist way: as a manifestation of their “natural” (innate) brutality, cruelty, treachery, and anti-Semitism, or as a result of intrigues by Austro-Hungarian, Polish or German secret services. Hence, Ukrainians are not fit to be considered a political nation, much less an independent state worthy of a place within the comity of the nationstate system.

My exposition will focus on discussing how, under the conditions of statelessness, Ukrainians sought to defend their national interests on the eve of the Second World War. My task is to trace the general logic of the processes and ideas.

Characterization of the interwar period

The defeat in the liberation struggle of 1917–1923 compelled Ukrainians to reconsider the organizational forms and methods of their struggle for the state independence. The ideological principles unpinning the struggle were of particular importance. In order to evaluate the events of that time, it is important to properly understand not only the circumstances and processes influencing Ukrainian political life, but also the situation in Europe and in the world as a whole.

First. Dissatisfaction with the outcome of the First World War in the countries that suffered defeat (primarily Germany, Austria, and Turkey), as well as those nations that had not gained state independence (among them Ukrainians, Croats, and Slovaks). The former group sought revenge, the latter – to complete the process of establishing their own independent states.

Second. The colonial policy of the victorious European states, among which we must mention not only Great Britain, France, and Belgium, but also Hungary, Poland and Romania. For Ukrainians the key point was not only a brutally enforced policy of denationalization pursued by the aforementioned newly independent states in the territories inhabited by Ukrainians. We also have such illustrative examples of expansionist ambitions as the appeals by Poland to be granted overseas colonies seized from the Entente¹.

Third is the isolationist policy of the United States. During the interwar years, America suffered from the Great Depression and an incessant fear of Nazi propaganda. At that time, the theory of strong media effects, known as a “hypodermic needle” or a “bullet” theory became a major concern. That is, through corruption and influence peddling Hitler’s propaganda was to be spread through the American press to convince Americans to abandon their freedoms in favor of a “comfortable” life under dictatorship. In any case, the United States could not and did not have anything new to offer Europe in the sense of new political ideas and models that could undermine the growing influence of militarism and authoritarianism.

Fourth: a general understanding of the instability of the political situation and the inevitability of the next war was a consequence of aggressive saber rattling by the Soviet Union on the one hand and the emergence of authoritarian regimes in Western Europe, in particular in Italy, Germany, and Spain. Authoritarianism was in a sense the political radio of the day. The ideas that all the most challenging issues could be best inculcated with the help of charismatic leaders and a “strong hand” domi-

¹ Taras Hunczak. Polish Colonial Ambitions in the Inter-War Period. *Slavic Review*. Vol. 26. No. 4. 1967. December.

nated the political discourse. Paradoxically, this was caused by both the global spread of communist ideas coupled with the rapid development of the Soviet economy, and by the organizational success of the opponents of communism, first Italian fascism, and then German Nazism.

We need only to consider how anti-communism aligned Churchill and Mussolini. There is ample evidence that they both maintained a long correspondence. Churchill also had personal interest in close contacts between British intelligence and admiral Kanaris, chief of the *Abwehr*, the German military intelligence, a relationship that was ongoing before the allies adopted the doctrine of complete capitulation by Germany². Western democracies looked favorably first at Mussolini and then at Hitler precisely because of their anti-communist rhetoric.

Finally, the fifth. During those years, the whole world conceived international relations through a prism of national states and ethnic conflicts. This applies not only in cases of changing borders within Europe. The internment of American citizens of Japanese descent in the United States during the Second World War had no conceptual difference from Canada's internment of its Ukrainian-born Canadians during the First World War.

Lull before the storm

During the interwar period the Ukrainian liberation movement was undergoing a process of reassessment of the plight the Ukrainian people were in, and the consequences of failure in establishing an independent national state. They were subjected to the same social tensions and the stark geopolitical realities of that time as were all who lost in the WWI. Even in the Soviet Ukraine, under Russian Bolshevik occupation, intellectual discussions included rhetoric such as “Away From Moscow!”. Its author, the writer Mykola Khvyliovyi, in 1926 also wrote that “the hot temper that spawns fascism cannot but invoke sympathy”³. Such a statement would have been treated in a very different way after the Nuremberg process, but in the interwar period it had quite a different contextual meaning.

The remnants of various Ukrainian military formations, governments, political party factions, diplomatic representations and so on which ended up political refugees outside the newly created Soviet Union, could not continue the struggle through organizational forms and structures in being. Their military defeat also meant the collapse of existing political models. Therefore, quite naturally, new proposals were put forward on the

² Richard Bassett. *Hitler's Spy Chief: The Wilhelm Canaris Betrayal: The Intelligence Campaign Against Adolf Hitler*. Pegasus Books, 2013.

³ Mykola Khvyliovyi. *Ukraine or Malorosia? 1926*.

political agenda. Later, the history will show that many of the political tasks taken on by the leaders of the UPR (Ukrainian People's Republic), could again be addressed and implemented only after Ukraine gained independence. Therefore, armed struggle for state independence became the main task for the Ukrainian liberation movement in the interwar era. However, western democracies didn't understand, didn't see, as well as didn't want to see, the aspirations of Ukrainians. None of the newly-created states, except for Czechoslovakia during the governance of Tomas Masaryk, recognized the right of Ukrainians to have their own state.

Accordingly, the Ukrainian political elite were confronted with significant change in the geopolitical realm. One part of the political leaders linked their hopes with the development of the Soviet Ukraine. These proponents of aligning with the left (socialist or communist) ideology included the chairman of the Ukrainian Parliament (Central Council), Mykhailo Hrushevs'kyi, and others who returned to Ukraine after the defeat of the liberation struggle. The second part was establishing a Ukrainian People's Republic in exile (Symon Petliura) and Hetmanate circle of Pavlo Skoropads'kyi. Yet another group was actively participating in the legal political life of the newly created independent states, first and foremost, Poland.

What is more, a considerable number of the leaders simply withdrew from any political life, including the most charismatic Ukrainian commander and professional revolutionary Nestor Makhno, who defended Petliura's honor at the trial of his murderer, a Bolshevik agent Schwartzbard, following which he quietly lived and died in Paris. Similarly, Volodymyr Vynnychenko, head of the UPR government, lived his last days in France.

However, there was a fourth group of Ukrainian political leaders that decided to forego efforts to salvage defeated state structures. They founded various underground organizations. The greatest success was achieved by the outstanding organizer Yevhen Konovalets'. In 1920, a group of his political allies founded the Ukrainian Military Organization, and subsequently in 1929 the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists. Gradually, the OUN becomes the most influential Ukrainian political force. At this stage, we will not delve into factional differences, as the political successes of the OUN during that period transcend efforts by others and allow us to talk about a new era in the Ukrainian liberation movement. Therefore, I will focus my remarks on the OUN.

The role of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists

To start with, efforts to build the state were no longer a primary focus. Issues concerning a political system in the future independent Ukrainian state were postponed. Instead, achieving Ukraine's independence

through military means became the primary task. This is not to say that there wasn't a constant discussion going on in these circles during the interwar period. However, to assert that certain publications pointed to some finalized political vision of an independent Ukraine would be baseless. The nationalistic movement evolved, taking into account various factors of socio-political life; first, in the interwar Europe, and then, during the Second World War.

Secondly, on the basis of the main task of gaining an independent state by armed struggle, the ideology of Ukrainian nationalism was formulated as politically non-partisan which was based on the concept of national interests. This was a transformative new concept, practically absent during the liberation struggle of 1917–1923. At the time, various political forces fought for the implementation of their party programs. Suffice it to say that the concept of national interests was present in the political vocabulary of any modern democratic state. In the Ukrainian context, it first appears under those extraordinary circumstances.

Thirdly, the political thinker and essayist Dmytro Dontsov played a special role in the development of the OUN ideology and actually is the author of the very concept of Ukrainian nationalism. Almost all the leaders of the Ukrainian nationalist movement acknowledged the influence of Dontsov's personality and ideas. This did not prevent them from treating Dontsov very critically because they took upon themselves responsibility for the political agenda. Dmytro Dontsov believed that under normal conditions a nation itself will decide which political model will be the best. He himself preferred the American and British versions.

Fourth, the OUN considered the Soviet Union as a major and immediate threat to the future existence of the independent Ukraine and even Ukrainian nation on the whole (glaring example was the Holodomor – genocide by famine). Negative assessment was given primarily to Russian chauvinism. Communist ideology was considered by Ukrainian nationalists as a means of Russian domination and aggression at a certain historical stage. Hence, the fundamental principle upon which all further organizational and diplomatic activity of the Ukrainian nationalists develops is: all who are enemies of our enemies can be our allies or companions. Furthermore, emphasis was placed on the creation of a political entity that would represent the interests of Ukrainians and Ukraine in the inevitable Second World War.

Therefore, fifth, ties are established with military circles of Lithuania, Italy, Finland, and Germany. It is important to note that this is not about political cooperation with the ruling parties of these countries. In working with the military the OUN borrows certain organizational forms needed to create an effective underground organization able to raise a nationwide uprising for independence and not an ideology as such. Later,

during the Second World War, this task was transformed into a mission to organize an uprising within the entire Soviet Union as “the prison of peoples” (an expression of the Ukrainian poet Taras Shevchenko). The lofty goal was to enable all nations, occupied by communist Russia, to create their own independent states.

Sixth, racism was alien to the OUN’s ideology as a political ethos. The identification of potential allies and enemies was done through an assessment of how much they or others would contribute, or vice versa, hinder the creation of an independent state, rather than their national or racial origin. Nowhere ethnicity is a determinative factor. The OUN liberation rhetoric is based on the need to build a Ukrainian state the same as for each European nation.

Seventh, the assumption that the OUN was a totalitarian organization opposed to democratic Ukrainian parties that functioned under the laws of those states where their operation was allowed does not stand any criticism. One cannot compare apples and oranges, or complain, for example, that the army has an authoritarian structure. The army’s task is not to participate in democratic elections, but to protect the state in which different political forces can coexist. It is important to note that during both attempts to restore Ukrainian statehood in which the OUN was involved (Carpathian Ukraine in 1939; and the revolutionary Ukrainian state in 1941), the nationalists’ “politics” was based on the implementation of the coalition principle of shared political responsibility and cooperation with representatives of all existing political forces.

Summary

Since history does not belong to the natural sciences, its conclusions are always subjective and contextual. At the same time, it is important that we take into consideration, if possible, the full spectrum of factors that influenced and characterized the Ukrainian political reality in the interwar period. In doing this we must resist interpretation, based solely on the priorities dictated by new political agendas. There is no need to idealize or to demonize. Along with documents and facts speaking for themselves, we must seek to contextually understand the main vector of the Ukrainian liberation movement between the two wars.

The Ukrainian liberation movement set as its goal establishing the independence of Ukraine and not the extermination all non-Ukrainians or even, for some reason, Ukrainians themselves. On the other hand, one cannot ignore the social realities that led to the sad facts of inter-ethnic confrontation or even local wars within the Second World War. These obstacles to the creation of some sort of idealized historical representa-

tion, must not be ignored. Contextually, the long history of statelessness inevitably accumulated a host of vendettas and negative stereotypes. These negative factors should be cohered with strained relations with national minorities who lived on the terrains of Ukraine and whose leaders themselves strived to become the ruling class or surrogates for imperial colonial administrations thereby ignoring the rights of Ukrainians fore an independent state.

Given the fact that the Ukrainian liberation movement during the Second World War was mainly from the rural social strata, it also carried certain traits of medieval peasant wars, which sometimes put forward not a modern ideology but a simplistic patriarchal identification by the principle of “us vs them”. In the interwar era, the pendulum of the political mainstream swung left to right. However, to treat the Ukrainian liberation movement of that period as exclusively right-wing is also impossible considering the already mentioned social composition of the participants. Their understanding of social justice was: “there can be no social liberation without a national one”.

The history of the Ukrainian liberation movement in the nationalist period deserves deeper analysis in terms of its universal nature, not by analogizing with the radical xenophobic movements of Western Europe. After all, it was Dmytro Dontsov who also protested against applying the term “integral nationalism” to Ukrainian nationalism, and which is more relevant to the French realities of the early twentieth century. Ukrainian nationalism, whose ideology was shaped during the interwar period, has no imperial, chauvinistic or racist component, since it was a movement of a stateless nation seeking the creation of an independent state, and therefore its first tasks was an emancipation. That is why, it is neither Nazism nor fascism. In its content, it is more closely related to the conservative forces of Western Europe. Therefore, later, during the Second World War, the Ukrainian liberation movement made a significant contribution to the victory over German Nazism and the defeat of Russian communism.

A separate issue that needs special consideration is the role of the millions of Ukrainians who, serving in the Soviet Army, contributed to the victory over Hitler’s Germany. This is truly a great sacrifice by the whole Ukrainian nation. To grasp the complex nature of this issue, we need only note that having destroyed Nazism, they contributed to bringing to Europe a new invader – Russian imperialists, just as it was during the Soviet-Finnish War of 1939–1940, in which a large number of Ukrainians also participated. These issues also should not be depreciated, but rather bestowed a decent consideration.

We have evidence of the reluctance of Ukrainians to fight the Wehrmacht in 1941 because, remembering the Holodomor, they did not ima-

gine anything worse than Soviet power. We also have every reason to assert that the turning point in the course of the war in favor of the Soviet Union was largely due to the fact that Ukrainians in the USSR massively changed in this regard and began to identify Nazi Germany as their main enemy. As professor Timothy Snyder emphasizes, we need to better understand that the Second World War may have begun with Hitler's desire to seize Ukraine to expand the "living space" for his Reich. Also, professor Norman Davis pays special attention to the fact that Stalin was no better than Hitler except for his ability to become a "major ally" of the West. This alliance was created strictly due to the circumstances that somehow give grounds for self-deception or worse of some Western politicians and intellectuals who continue to talk about some kind of "progressiveness" of the Soviet Union and some "special path" for Russia.

The liberation ideology and revolutionary rhetoric of the Ukrainian nationalists and their more than a decade long struggle against impossible odds ultimately affected the entire Ukraine, making it the most volatile part of the Soviet Union, with the most powerful resistance in every imaginable form (nationalist, dissident, and spontaneous) to the communist system. History has shown the importance of the anti-imperial orientation of the Ukrainian liberation movement. And its importance did not lessen now, during a reawakening of Russian imperialism which uses new hybrid tactics to spread its ideological justifications of "a sovereign democracy", "the Orthodox civilization" and "the Russian world".

After the victory of the Revolution of Dignity, one can speak of the further consolidation of a Ukrainian political nation, in which not only ethnic Ukrainians but all national minorities and other social groups are defending the Ukrainian state as their own, using the ideas, rhetoric, and symbolism largely shaped by the Ukrainian liberation movement between the two World Wars in the twentieth century.