

Interventions:
Challenging the Myths of Twentieth-Century Ukrainian History

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Recently I was asked by the historian Alexei Miller to reflect on my experiences in the capacity of public intellectual as well as academic, namely as a challenger of nationalist historical myths. He was putting together a volume on *Geschichtspolitik* and thought that a first-hand account of resistance to dominant national narratives would be an interesting piece to include in the book. I have abridged this account and thought it would make a good talk for an occasion like this, for a talk about research and its implications.

What I have been challenging is Ukrainian myths about traumatic aspects of the twentieth-century.¹ By myths here I mean unexamined components of an ideologized version of history, articles of faith more than of reason. In this talk, I will first try to explain my motivations for challenging such myths, even though I realized it would cause considerable discomfort both to my targeted audience and to me personally. Then I will describe and evaluate the strategies I chose for my interventions. But before proceeding to the body of this talk, it is necessary to explain what myths I have been challenging.

¹ This article grows out of research supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada; the Pinchas and Mark Wisen Fellowship at the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum; and the University of Alberta. I am grateful for detailed comments on an earlier from Dominique Arel, Myrna Kostash, and Per Anders Rudling; I did not follow all their suggestions, but their input did much to improve this text.

One of the areas of contention is the interpretation of the great famine that racked Ukraine in 1932-33. In the mythicized version, Stalin unleashed the famine deliberately in order to kill Ukrainians in mass and thus to prevent them from achieving their aspirations to establish a national state. I, however, point out that the precondition for the famine was the reckless collectivization drive, which almost destroyed Soviet agriculture as a whole. I do not deny that the famine in Soviet Ukraine and in the Ukrainian-inhabited Kuban region of Soviet Russia was more intense than elsewhere in the Soviet Union, that its intensity resulted from particularly severe measures applied to Ukraine and the Kuban, and that the severity was connected with a major offensive against perceived nationalism in the communist party of Ukraine. My somewhat more nuanced view is a problem for the mythologists, who want the world to recognize that the famine, or as they call it – the Holodomor, was a genocide as defined by the United Nations in 1948. This campaign became Ukrainian state policy during the presidency of Viktor Yushchenko (2005-10). Although I do think that what happened in Ukraine in 1932-33 could fit under the capacious UN definition (“...deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life, calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part...”), I oppose the campaign for recognition as genocide for a number of reasons. The genocide argument is used to buttress another campaign, to glorify the anticommunist resistance of the Ukrainian nationalists during World War II. I do not think that Ukrainians who embrace the heritage of the wartime nationalists should be calling on the world to empathize with the victims of the famine if they are not able to empathize with the victims of the nationalists. I think, further, that there is something wrong with a campaign that finds its greatest resonance in the area of Ukraine where there was no famine, and in the overseas diaspora deriving from that region. I have problems with all the anger at Russians and Jews that gets wrapped up in the genocide campaign. And I also have problems with the UN definition itself, which excludes victims of social and political mass murder and has become a category for political manipulation.²

² I presented my views more fully in “Problems with the Category of Genocide and with Classifying the Ukrainian Famine of 1932-33 as a Genocide,” paper presented to the Department of History, University of Winnipeg; Oseredok Ukrainian Cultural and Educational Centre; Department of German and Slavic Studies, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, 16 September 2008; also in a Ukrainian version at the International Scientific

I also have been critical of the use of inflated numbers for the tally of the famine's victims: president Yushchenko and his Ukrainian Institute of National Memory insisted it was ten million, while overseas diaspora organizations have been using seven to ten million. None of these figures can be justified by demographic data, which indicates an excess mortality in Ukraine in 1932-33 somewhere between 2.6 and 3.9 million. What galls the mythologists is that these numbers are less than the number usually used for the Jewish Holocaust, and having a number bigger than six million is important to them. I have also been active in exposing how this kind of competing victimology is used to justify the violence of radical Ukrainian nationalists during World War II.

My interest in the famine flowed out of my work on another moment in Ukraine's traumatic history, the second large theme of my interventions and challenges – the Holocaust. The fundamental point of contention between the adherents of the national myth and me is whether or not the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (hereafter OUN) and its armed force, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (hereafter UPA, from its Ukrainian initials) participated in the Holocaust. They deny this entirely. My research indicates, however, as does the research of scholars around the world, that the participation was significant.

In the summer of 1941, as the Germans invaded Ukraine, militias connected with OUN organized several massive pogroms against the Jewish population, notably in Lviv. The militias arrested and beat Jews, abused Jewish women, and rounded up Jews for the Germans to shoot. In many other localities in the regions of Galicia and Volhynia, the militias did not organize pogrom-like public spectacles, but arrested Jews and either shot them themselves or handed them over to the German or Romanian authorities to shoot. Altogether in this phase, OUN was implicated in the murder of tens of thousands of Jews.

After this wave of mass violence subsided, and the Germans began a more systematic liquidation of the Jewish population, OUN sent many of its members into

Conference "Holodomor of 1932-1933 in Ukraine: Reasons, Demographic Consequences, Legal Treatment," Ukrainian Institute of National Memory and National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, Kyiv, 25-26 September 2008. Neither the English nor Ukrainian text has been published.

police units in German service.³ OUN did not do this in order to kill Jews – it had other reasons, but these Ukrainian police served as important implements of the Final Solution in Ukraine and Belarus, particularly in rounding up Jews for execution. In this way OUN members became involved in hundreds of thousands of murders.

Then in spring 1943 thousands of these Ukrainian policemen deserted their posts with their weapons and formed the nucleus of the OUN-led UPA. The preparation of such an action was among the reasons why OUN had sent its men into the police in the first place. UPA launched a massive ethnic cleansing action against the Polish population of Volhynia and later Galicia, in which perhaps a hundred thousand Poles perished. (The slaughter of the Poles is well documented, but the national mythologizers downplay it.) While killing Poles, the soldiers of UPA also routinely killed any Jewish survivors that they encountered. As the Red Army approached in the winter of 1944, UPA and separate OUN security forces lured Jews out of hiding in the woods, then enrolled them in labor camps, and later killed them systematically. Overall, UPA killed at least thousands of Jews. The myth maintains that Jews served as doctors in UPA, and therefore UPA rescued, rather than killed, Jews. Defenders of the mythical history often circulate fabricated memoirs of a non-existent Jewish woman who served in UPA.

In speaking of the views I oppose as mythologies, I do not always mean to make truth claims. Whether OUN organized pogroms and how many people perished in the famine are indeed about questions of fact, and my contentions can be verified without much difficulty; but whether the famine constituted a genocide is a matter of interpretation; and whether one should campaign for its recognition as a genocide is rather a political and moral issue.

Motivations of Intervention

My decision to intervene on these issues is partly just a result of my training as a historian. Once I took up the project of clarifying the history of the Holocaust in Ukraine, I submitted the topic the usual disciplinary procedures, which include researching in primary sources and rethinking in relation to existing research. The tremendous gulf

³ I benefited from reading the excellent, essentially unpublished research on the *Schutzmannschaften* by Per Anders Rudling.

between what the sources told me and the common wisdom in Ukrainian discourse was something I had never encountered before in my professional career. I was also struck by the complete absence of literature on the topic written from within the field of Ukrainian studies. As I worked, I more and more came to the conclusion that here was a moment where a revisionist treatment was not only appropriate, but obligatory.

Throughout this project I have kept returning in my mind to the same basic idea: that the truth is a value in and of itself. No matter what we would like to believe about something, we are obliged to uncover the truth. It has never ceased to astound me in the course of all the debates in which I have engaged, that so few people seem to be interested in that. My arguments have repeatedly been rejected out of hand, without a serious and honest confrontation with them or with the sources on which they rest. My opponents in debate seem to be interested in defending a certain position, not in figuring out what happened, as historians are supposed to do. When I originally took up this project, I had no idea about the OUN militias in summer 1941 and I doubted that UPA killed Jews or thought that it might have done so only exceptionally.⁴ I made my discoveries with very mixed feelings. I did not like what I was finding out, but I also experienced that satisfaction that a professional historian obtains when solving a difficult problem.

Heightening my interest in the topic, because of the intellectual challenge it posed, was the extreme polarization of memory between Ukrainians and Jews. How could their views on what happened be so strikingly different? Protestations of total innocence on one side were contradicted by deep resentments for complicity on the other. Indeed, some Jews felt that the Ukrainians were simply “the worst.”⁵ It was a puzzle for

⁴ See, for comparison, an earlier piece I wrote: John-Paul Himka, "Ukrainian Collaboration in the Extermination of the Jews during the Second World War: Sorting Out the Long-Term and Conjunctural Factors," in *The Fate of the European Jews, 1939-1945: Continuity or Contingency*, ed. Jonathan Frankel (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* 13 (1997): 170-89.

⁵ Daniel Mendelsohn, *The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million*, photographs by Matt Mendelsohn (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 100, 116. Mendelsohn himself handles the issue of Ukrainian behavior during the Holocaust with great sensitivity. See my discussion, "How to Think about Difficult Things: Daniel Mendelsohn's *The Lost*," forthcoming in *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*.

me, one that I feel I eventually worked out in its essentials;⁶ it whetted my curiosity and drove my quest to find out what actually happened and thus make sense of the disparities.

My research and thinking also awakened a moral sense about this topic, something that was not so prominent in my earlier studies. I wrote a piece in 2003 that raised the issue of how Ukrainian-diaspora discourse could be so complacent and reticent about UPA's murder of the Poles and the Ukrainian police's well documented role in the Holocaust.⁷ To me, this nonchalance seemed wrong. Moreover, I was disturbed by what was going on both in Ukraine and in the diaspora: on the one hand, OUN and UPA were being glorified, and on the other, the history of Ukrainian Jews in the Holocaust was being suppressed. This too, seemed to me very wrong. My position is that the horrible crimes committed by Ukrainian nationalists against Jews and Poles during the Second World War cannot be undone, and all that later Ukrainians can do about them is to admit that they happened and to regret them. It is not enough, but it is all that is possible. Certainly they cannot glorify the people who committed them.

Another major spur to my activities as a gadfly was the *Geschichtspolitik* of President Yushchenko in Ukraine. In June 2007 he officially celebrated the centenary of the birth of UPA commander Roman Shukhevych. Shortly thereafter the Ukrainian post office issued a stamp in Shukhevych's honor that bore the emblems of both OUN and UPA. Not much later Yushchenko named Shukhevych a posthumous Hero of Ukraine. Shortly before leaving office in early 2010, Yushchenko also made a posthumous Hero of Stepan Bandera, the leader of the wing of OUN that was the chief Ukrainian perpetrator during the Holocaust and later ethnic cleansing actions. A few days later, Yushchenko called on municipalities to name schools, streets, and squares after the heroes of OUN-UPA. Almost immediately afterwards, the Ukrainian Canadian Congress appealed to the government of Canada to recognize veterans of OUN-UPA as members of the resistance during World War II and to pay them veterans' benefits. While Yushchenko pursued his

⁶ John-Paul Himka, *Ukrainians, Jews and the Holocaust: Divergent Memories*. Saskatoon: Heritage Press, 2009. This is the text of the 2009 Mohyla Lecture sponsored by the Prairie Centre for the Study of Ukrainian Heritage, St. Thomas More College, University of Saskatchewan. I am grateful to Bohdan Kordan for inviting me.

⁷ John-Paul Himka, "War Criminality: A Blank Spot in the Collective Memory of the Ukrainian Diaspora." *Spaces of Identity* 5, no. 1 (April 2005), <http://spacesofidentity.net/> (accessed 6 October 2010).

campaign to have every country recognize the famine of 1932-33 as a genocide, he simultaneously suppressing the history of the other genocide, the Holocaust. He used the Security Service of Ukraine to pursue his historico-political agenda. It produced two deceptions, one that whitewashed the history of OUN vis-à-vis the pogroms and another that blamed Jews disproportionately for the famine.⁸ Someone had to say something about this, and I felt well positioned to do so.

The last motivation that I will mention is also connected to Yushchenko and his historical policies. Ukraine has a divided memory about both the famine and OUN-UPA. Simply put, the West of Ukraine puts OUN-UPA at the center of its heroic narrative of World War II, while the East and South put the Red Army at the center. Western Ukraine is also more convinced that the famine was a genocide than the rest of Ukraine, even though Western Ukraine was not part of the Soviet Union when the famine occurred. Ukraine's first president deftly avoided alienating either regional perspective, while his successor sometimes played one identity project off against the other. President Yushchenko, however, embraced entirely what one of my colleagues nicknamed the "OUN-UPA-Holodomor" identity and pushed it vigorously on the Ukrainian public. He was massively defeated in the 2010 presidential election and replaced by a man who pushes the opposite perspective. In my view, this historical-identity war has been very harmful to Ukraine. Politicians find it all too attractive to mobilize the population with historical symbols, but they thereby drive the wedge in deeper between regions and between perspectives. It is always easier to deliver symbols than decent health care or affordable homes. I consider the deconstruction of the historical mythologies of both camps to be the prescribed medicine for Ukrainian political discourse.

Strategies

I have made my interventions in forms appropriate to both a scholar (a monograph in progress, articles in scholarly journals, book reviews, conference presentations) and to

⁸ On these issues, see Dmitrii Rybakov, "Marko Tsarynnyk: Istorychna napivpravda hirsha za odvertu brekhniu," *Lb.ua*, 5 November 2009, http://lb.ua/news/2009/11/05/13147_marko_tsarinnik_istorichna.html (accessed 6 October 2010); and John-Paul Himka, "The Holodomor in the Ukrainian-Jewish Encounter Initiative," paper presented at the meeting of the Ukrainian Jewish Encounter Initiative, Ditchley Park, England, 14-16 December 2009.

a public intellectual (opinion pieces, letters to the editor, open letters). Here I will assess some of the pluses and minuses of these genres. There are several problems with the scholarly forms. One is that they are very slow. It takes a long time to research and write a monograph, at least in my case. I started serious research on my first book in 1974, and my last book was published in 2009, so it took me thirty-five years to write four monographs. The pace of scholarly publication, not just production, is slow. A major article on the Holocaust I wrote in 2004 has still not been published, although it has been accepted for a long time. The other major problem with scholarly forms is that they have a small readership. It is hard to make a dent on public opinion when one writes in the antiquated form of a twenty-five page, footnoted article in a professional journal that is purchased primarily by major research libraries. The third problem is that scholarly forms take effort and time to read. Today's reader prefers shorter, simpler pieces; op-eds are the perfect size and at the perfect level for addressing the public.

I discovered the power of short pieces delivered via internet in 2004, on the eve of the Orange Revolution in Ukraine. I reacted to what I thought was hysterical and sometimes xenophobic rhetoric on the part of the partisans of Yushchenko, then a presidential candidate, and sent around to various lists and colleagues an eleven-hundred-word text dissenting from the prevailing view.⁹ Soon everyone I knew had read it, and many more whom I did not know, in Ukraine as well as in the overseas diaspora. An open letter distributed by email and the internet proved to be an extraordinarily effective way to communicate with a large audience in a timely fashion. No normal scholarly venue could have accomplished what a short text on the internet could. After this lesson, I was able to intervene in a similar fashion when a diaspora filmmaker was making an offensive movie about the Holodomor,¹⁰ when Yushchenko's Security Service was deceiving the

⁹ John-Paul Himka, "Apocalypse Tomorrow: Some Remarks on Two Texts on the Ukrainian Elections," *aaus-list* (American Association for Ukrainian Studies), 29 October 2004, <http://www.ukrainianstudies.org/aaus-list/0410/msg00027.html> (accessed 7 October 2010).

¹⁰ John-Paul Himka, "How Many Perished in the Famine and Why Does It Matter?" *BRAMA: News and Community Press*, 2 February 2008 http://www.brama.com/news/press/2008/02/080202himka_famine.html. Versions of this also appeared online in UNIAN (a Ukrainian news agency), *The Ukraine List*, and *Kyiv*

public about OUN and the pogroms,¹¹ and particularly when Yushchenko and the Ukrainian Canadian congress were making OUN and UPA into heroes.¹²

But there are disadvantages to short, instant response. One is that instant is sloppier. I carried on a polemic with a former president of the Ukrainian World Congress, and each of our rapid responses contained errors. I contrast such quick repartee, with its recurring errors, to the slow interchange in scholarship. That article that I have not published since 2004 has been rewritten three or four times, and a number of sets of careful eyes have gone over it. My last monograph took three years to go from my finished draft to publication. In that time, I had to respond twice to the comments of careful reviewers. I did not like it that the appearance of my book was being delayed, but I must admit that it is a much better book as a result.

Short, like instant, is also problematic, because history is complex and a short text often has to oversimplify. Short texts are best at throwing monkey wrenches into the spokes of larger narratives or myths, but they are not good for articulating a sustained argument of any complexity. Something always has to give. Another problem with short and instant pieces is that they sharpen the debate too much, which can constitute an impediment to thoughtful work.

One could argue that scholars should stick to scholarship and leave the formation of public opinion to journalists. But I disagree with that in principle. Scholarship is not a luxury – it has its responsibilities. In my case, not intervening would have left the mythmaking unchallenged; and then the nationalist viewpoint, already hegemonic in the overseas diaspora, in the Ukrainian studies community, and in Western Ukraine, would

Post; in Ukrainian translation in *Liva sprava* and *Ukrains'ka pravda*; and in Russian translation in *My – Mankurty*.

¹¹ John-Paul Himka, “True and False Lessons from the Nachtigall Episode.” *BRAMA: News and Community Press*, 19 March 2008

http://www.brama.com/news/press/2008/03/080319himka_nachtigall.html John-Paul Himka, “Be Wary of Faulty Nachtigall Lessons.” *Kyiv Post*, 27 March 2008.

¹² The most important text of mine was a debate I had with Zenon Kohut. I did not send it out for publication at all, but just emailed it to colleagues. It was then “virally” circulated. Soon it was picked up by *The Ukraine List*, a Ukrainian translation has appeared in *Krytyka*, another Ukrainian translation is to be published in a volume edited by Yaroslav Hrytsak and Tarik Cyril Amar, and a Russian translation is forthcoming in *Zhurnal rossiiskikh i vostochnoevropeskikh istoricheskikh issledovaniï*, no. 2 (2010).

have become even stronger and even harder to dislodge. No evidence, I am sure, will convince the nationalist true believers. But it seems to me absolutely necessary to express a different viewpoint, to create a space for and possibility of intellectual dissent; hence the recourse to the short pieces on the internet.

Although one of my courses became the subject of rather intense controversy,¹³ I do not consider the classroom to be the place for promoting one idea or another. I have given a number of undergraduate and graduate seminars on the Holocaust and one on the famine of 1932-33. I use these occasions to explore things for myself through collective reading and discussion. When an issue is controversial, I have tried to find the best presentations of the varying points of view. Students should be exposed to different perspectives and then sort out the issues for themselves. Our university motto is *Quaecumque vera* – whatsoever things are true. I subscribe fully. The university classroom is for exploration and intellectual growth, not for indoctrination.

In the course of these interventions, a few questions emerged concerning what might be called my location. At the beginning, I felt strongly that I should not try to intervene in Ukraine itself, that it was not my place; I thought I should restrict my commentary to the diaspora, since that is where I am located. I realized later, however, that this stance was impossible to maintain. Much of what I wrote in the diaspora was read in Ukraine, and things I published in Ukraine and even in Ukrainian were being read in the diaspora. I had failed to understand that we live in a highly transnational era. Another, related location question was my self-identification as a Ukrainian. Identity location makes some difference in the kind of demythologizing in which I have been engaging: challenging core myths from the inside. By example I demonstrate that one

¹³ The controversy started when a leading Canadian nonfiction writer who sat in on a seminar I gave about the famine wrote up her experience: Myrna Kostash, “Genocide or ‘a Vast Tragedy’: University Students in an Alberta Classroom Try to Decide,” *Literary Review of Canada*, December 2009, <http://reviewcanada.ca/essays/2009/12/01/genocide-or-a-vast-tragedy/>; and see the letters about this, <http://reviewcanada.ca/magazine/2009/12/#letters>. The discussion also took place in *Ukrainian News*: Jars Balan, “Gullible Leftists Play into the Hands of Putin’s Neo-Soviet Apologists,” 28 December 2009-19 January 2010; John-Paul Himka, “Alternatives to Self-Deluding Campaign Exist in Calling Attention to the Famine,” 20 January-3 February 2010; Bohdan Klid, “Haiti Is a Vast Tragedy, Ukraine Famine Was Genocide,” 4-17 February 2010.

need not identify with OUN-UPA to identify, and be identified, as a Ukrainian. And I actually do have a Ukrainian identity. I have worked on Ukrainian history for over forty years; before that I studied to become a Ukrainian priest; my wife and I raised our children to speak Ukrainian; I attend a Ukrainian Orthodox church; I visit Ukraine and have close friends and relatives there; I like to eat Ukrainian food and drink *horilka*; I like to listen to various kinds of Ukrainian music, along with other music; I pursue a deep interest in Ukrainian sacral art. How am I not Ukrainian? (And I can hear the chorus of my critics: “Because you are a traitor!”).¹⁴

Conclusions

The debates are by no means over. At the moment, I feel that the biggest accomplishment has been to have forced debate on important issues. It is no longer quite as comfortable to hold on to the illusions as it had been.

It has not been easy to make these interventions, and I do not recommend that others seek out such opportunities. It is very easy to make mistakes. Still, intellectuals every once in a while are forced into an *ich-kann-nicht-anders* position. I hope that this report on my experiences will resonate with others in this situation and be taken as an expression of solidarity. And I hope that those with less encumbered intellectual lives have at least found this account to be of interest.

¹⁴ After I published an article critical of Shukhevych, Mykola Kulishov sent me an email (dated 20 March 2008). The subject heading was *zrada*, i.e., treason.