

## **How history goes wrong: historical politics and its outcomes**

‘The ever slaughterous war is a fight of ghosts’ Sergei Dovlatov

Combatants from Eastern Ukraine call their enemy ‘fascists’. They put signs on their tanks: ‘To Kiev!’, ‘To Lviv!’ – echoing historical examples of Red Army slogan ‘To Berlin!’ . On 24 August, 2014 the insurgents have organized a ‘parade’ in Donetsk showing prisoners of war marching through one of central streets – obviously imitating the Stalin’s ‘parade’ of German POWs in Moscow, 1944. Obviously, these facts could be interpreted as a manipulative technologies used by behind the screen spin-doctors. However, no less evident, that considerable part of combatants and their supporters in Eastern Ukraine sincerely believe that they fight against ‘fascists’ while their opponents believe that they fight for true Ukraine.

War in Eastern Ukraine (called anti-terrorist operation) officially started in April 2014. War in minds which now seems to be an integral (and natural) part of current military and civic conflict started much earlier – when past has become an important element of the present.

Since the end of 1980s Ukraine has followed a classical scenario of use and misuse of history in nation building. After 1987 history has served as a major tool of condemnation of the ruling Communist party as well as of legitimation of the claims of opposition. After 1991 history of Ukraine (together with Ukrainian literature) has become a central element in the civil education of the youngsters (both at the levels of school and higher education curricula). A standard set of commemorative practices, historical symbols and lieux de memoire have been established, created and set up in 1990s to ensure a homogeneity in the realm of national identity.

However, implementation of this classical scenario was complicated by important systemic factors. Nation-builders decided to appeal to the standard scheme of national history designed by the father of Ukrainian master-narrative Mykhailo Hrushevski in the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century. In Soviet times this scheme was forbidden, therefore, in independent Ukraine it has immediately got a status of a spring of ‘true history’. In this scheme ‘the nation’ was congruent to ‘the people’, i.e. – ethnic Ukrainians. This ‘little rift within the lute’ has spoiled the tune from the very beginning – the 19<sup>th</sup> century project, quite antiquarian by the essence had to be implemented under dramatically different cultural and political circumstances: in independent, multicultural Ukraine where historical regions had different cultural and political legacies, memories and visions of the past and the present. .

Normative vision of history, imposed by ‘nationalizing state’ (to recall R. Brubaker’s term), aimed

in consolidation of the nation, started to work against itself. Ethnic exclusivity has left too little space for other nationalities that inhabited Ukraine for centuries (Jews, Poles, Russians, Crimean Tatars). In many cases the *othering* have reached the level of xenophobia and cultural branding. Concerns about possible social outcomes of this kind of history were raised by professional historians and public figures since the end of 1990s, however, they were either ignored or mocked by power-holders, as well as by the part of statist nation-builders from public sector. Top power-holders preferred to keep an ambivalent politics, giving consent to different, sometimes mutually exclusive versions of the past.

In the meanwhile this scheme of history has become an object of instrumentalist use and abuse by political opponents of the 'nationalizing state' and its cultural elites. First, orthodox Communists have made their best to represent the excesses of 'nationalized history' as a wrongdoings of 'evil nationalists' (that was the major trend in 1990s). Since the beginnings of 2000s, when Communists started to loose their influence, another political force took charge in exploitation of the history for political needs: Party of Regions.

Like Communists, they have also address their appeal to those segments of population of Ukraine that en masse can be presented as a bearers of Soviet patrimonial instincts and nostalgia, carefully fostered by local elites – predominantly in the East of Ukraine and Crimea, partly in Southern Ukraine.

These regions have not only become the social base and a kind of a feudal domain of Party of Regions - they have also served as a milieu for cultivation of Soviet symbolism and mythology (like Great Patriotic War, Lenin and some cases Stalin cult), in other words – of Soviet version of historical mythology. This variant of the past was deliberately confronted and opposed to the 'nationalized history' for the sake of the present, either for the control over minds, or for instrumental use and abuse of history for political needs (defamation of political opponents, deflection of attention from urgent social problems etc) . As a result, a huge segment of population remained under the influence of quasi-Soviet historical mythology which coped with Soviet-style patrimonialism cherished both by local landlords and by their clients. Moreover, this version of the past has become an element of the street politics – since 2005 physical clashes between supporters of nationalized history and its pro-Soviet version have become a routine.

The effect was enhanced by another powerful actor – Russia – whose media that dominated East Ukrainian informational space did their best to propagate renewed Soviet style historical mythology which included a renewed cult of Stalin (as an 'effective manager') and the myth of a Great Victory over fascism. In 2007 Russian top leadership, diplomatic institutions and media have launched a

massive informational campaign against ‘nationalism’ in Ukraine which has focused almost exclusively on history issues – state politics of history under Yushchenko was presented as a feast of nationalism and anti-Russian propaganda. Part of this campaign was devoted to intensive reproduction of Soviet cliché about Ukrainian nationalists as Nazi collaborators. From their side, proponents of radical version of nationalized history in Ukraine have exerted every effort to produce and radicalize their version of the past – glorifying persons with debatable past like Stepan Bandera – whose name in Eastern Ukraine serves as a synonym of ‘fascism’ since Soviet times.

In the end, two mutually exclusive versions of the past cultivated, exaggerated and manipulated by politicians, two ‘virtualized realities’, two sets of simulacra have formed a basis for real conflict which cost now is being measured by human lives. Obviously, conflict over history is a part of bigger picture which includes social, economical, socio-psychological and many other components. This is exactly the case of how history went wrong – in every possible sense.