

## About History, Us and Ukraine

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We don't really know much about Ukraine. When I was taught the history of the Soviet Union at an Estonian school more than 30 years ago, of which the history of Ukraine was an integral part, three things stuck in my mind: first, Kievan Rus as the starting point of the Russian statehood and the three Varangians – Rurik, Sineus and Truvor – who were called to rule Russia. I once visited the alleged grave of Truvor in Stary Izborsk. Second, Hetman Bohdan Khmelnytsky, who concluded the Treaty of Pereyaslav in 1654 on the unification of the north eastern regions of today's Ukraine with Russia. Third, Ivan Mazepa, an ally of Swedish king Charles XII in the Battle of Poltava in 1709 when their allied force was beaten by the army of Peter I. Thus, in the Soviet interpretation of history, Khmelnytsky was on the right side and Mazepa on the wrong side. Or, if looked at from Sweden's standpoint, then exactly the contrary. The general impression was, anyway, that they were on the different sides.

Some years ago I saw both men presented friendly side-by-side in the hall of fame of the history of the Ukrainian statehood at the Museum of Armed Forces of Ukraine in Kiev. As a matter of fact, why should we approach the Ukrainian history from the Russian or Swedish perspective?

Under the Russian Empire – a period that began for the Right-Bank Ukraine with the partitions of Poland three quarters of a century later than for Estonia and Livonia – the Russian authorities energetically opposed the Catholic church and Polish nobility, especially following the Polish insurrection of 1831. The confrontation of the Estonian and Latvian peasantry with the Baltic German nobility and the Baltic German Lutheran priesthood bears some similarities to the relationship between Ukrainians and the Polish elite. As Estonians have softened their opposition to the Baltic Germans, the relationship between Ukrainians and Poles have grown friendly as well. Surely, it does not stop us from invoking the 700-year long servitude under the heel of the Baltic German barons from time to time. I don't know if the same is true about Ukraine.

Historical comparisons are not absolute. The special status of Livonia, Estonia and Courland in the Russian Empire held until the end of the 19th century. Ethnic and language barriers between the elite and Estonians and Latvians were stronger than between the Polish elite and Ukrainians. The Lutheran church was a shared feature of all the Baltic governorates, despite attempts to convert Estonians and Latvians into the Russian Orthodoxy, pursued with limited success, but in Ukraine religion was a characteristic of estate, especially after the merge of the Uniate church with the Russian Orthodox Church in 1839 – the Polish elite were Catholic and Ukrainian peasants were Orthodox.

On the other hand, serfdom was abolished in Ukraine almost half a century later than in the Baltic governorates and the situation with land property rights has remained ambiguous to this day. This fact should not be overlooked because the law ensuring equal (land) property rights made people equal. Otherwise everything is decided by land allocation, the landlord's benevolence and whether somebody is in his good graces, which is, obviously, a straight path to corruption.

After the restoration of Estonia's independence we found out more about Ukraine's history. In 1987, *The White Guard* by Mikhail Bulgakov was translated into Estonian. This book describes the events in Kiev in 1918. Until the late 1980s our understanding of Ukraine's history after the end of World War I was defined by the narrative of the Russian Civil War

that had been carefully developed and supported by countless monuments. Thus, the publication of an Estonian translation of this book was more of a literature event, just another book by the author of *The Master and Margarita* – a novel the reading of which was almost an anti-Soviet act.

For many Estonians with an interest in history, Nestor ("Batko") Makhno and Symon Petliura, the President of Ukraine's Directorate in 1919-1920, have become semi-mythical characters from Soviet books and feature films alongside Chapayev, Kolchak and Denikin, and, naturally, Pyotr Wrangel, a Baltic German general who was the last supreme commander of the White Guard in Crimea. Ukrainian historians, however, have extensively researched the period of 1917-1920 after Ukraine has gained independence. Now we know that at this time Ukraine had an army of its own (where a number of Estonian officers also served who ended up in Ukraine in the tumultuous events of World War I and the Russian Civil War).

Timothy Snyder, an internationally renowned historian, researched this period in his book *The Red Prince* published in 2008. In 1918, after the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, it was not immediately clear that the fate of World War I and European continental empires had been decided. Many Eastern European peoples were looking for their future rulers in the German and Austrian courts, including Finland and the United Baltic Duchy of Baltic Germans. European empires were also planning an eastern expansion. Snyder's "red prince" was Wilhelm von Habsburg who the Habsburgs wanted to make the king of Ukraine after the victorious conclusion of the world war. However, the victory never came and the Hohenzollerns and the Habsburgs both lost their power together with the Romanovs. The adventurous life of Wilhelm von Habsburg (Ukrainian pseudonym: Vasyl Vyshyvanyi) came to an end with his arrest by SMERSH in Vienna in 1947 followed by death in the next year in a prison camp in the vicinity of Kiev. He is commemorated with several toponyms in Ukrainian cities.

An item exhibited in the Museum of Armed Forces of Ukraine neatly illustrates choices available to the peoples of Eastern Europe in 1918: a Finnish knife presented by Finland's Field Marshal and head of state Mannerheim to Ukraine's Hetman Pavlo Skoropadsky. Skoropadsky was backed by Germany to become the ruler of Ukraine.

Johannes Vares (with pen name Barbarus) studied at the Kiev University before World War I. It was one of the reasons why he applied for the position of Estonia's envoy to Ukraine after the conclusion of the Treaty of Tartu in 1920. However, Ukraine was soon incorporated into the USSR and an envoy was no longer needed. In 1940 he was one of the puppets used in the liquidation of Estonia's independence; unlike many others, however, he was the one pushed to the very front. Events that are currently unfolding resemble the "peaceful people's revolution" in Estonia in 1940. 74 years ago we also saw demonstrations (spontaneous, of course) where men with military bearing dressed in identical suits strode in straight lines, singing marching songs of the Red Army. A short time afterwards "elections" were simultaneously staged in all the three Baltic states where voters' activity and the percentage of yes-vote greatly surpassed the plausibility threshold of any society. One month later the sham representative assemblies of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia elected in the aforesaid way all asked on the same day to join the Soviet Union under the vigilant watch of the Red Army soldiers and the Baltic Fleet sailors who guarded the assembly chambers.

Political spin doctors can understand the need for the astronomical unanimity of election results and the absolute simultaneity of the decision to liquidate independent statehood and join the USSR made by the puppet parliaments of the three de facto occupied states. In Western culture, however, democratic elections and their results are an expression of the individual free will of the voters – something that renders a 90% unanimity impossible.

Nevertheless, culture matters, as wrote Lawrence E. Harrison and Samuel P. Huntington in the title of their book published 15 years ago.

Johannes Vares-Barbarus probably never admitted whether he knew the origin of those men in plainclothes who marched in straight lines in Tallinn in the summer of 1940, singing marching songs of the Red Army, or not. We also don't know whether his powers of self-persuasion were sufficient to convince himself that the absolute majority of the Estonian people decided to liquidate their state within one month. We are still arguing whether he committed suicide or was secretly murdered by his employers after his task had been completed. We are still arguing whether Vares was a useful idiot or an agent of Soviet secret services and, thus, a traitor; of course, the latter does not exclude the former.

One way or another, why should we remember these events that occurred more than 75 years ago? Isn't it true that history does not repeat itself or if it does then as a farce only? However, this is exactly the reason. Farce is also a reality.

In the 1990s in the entire Eastern Europe the attention of the public with an interest in history focused on the events of World War II and on the repressions unleashed by the Soviet Union against its own subjects and, even more, against the peoples of Eastern Europe. We became aware of the Holodomor made famous in 1986 in *The Harvest of Sorrow* by Robert Conquest. In the same year the Chernobyl disaster occurred in Ukraine, the failed crisis management of which, oscillating between openness and suppression of information, drove another nail in the coffin of the Soviet Union. It had a direct impact on Estonia as almost 5000 men were sent from here to clean up the consequences of the disaster and then abandoned without help and support after they returned home.

In the early 1920s the border between Poland and Soviet Russia was also established that left the Western part of Ukraine with Poland. Ukrainians lived in Ruthenia in Czechoslovakia and in Bessarabia in Romania. In 1928, Ukrainian nationalists founded their organisation (OUN) in Poland that became the foundation of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army created in 1943. Similar to the Estonians, the Ukrainians also tried to fight for their cause during World War II. It was easier for the Estonians because Estonia had existed as an independent state for more than 20 years and was a member of the League of Nations. During the period of independent statehood the Estonians more or less managed to overcome their internal tensions and conflicts, despite the subversive activities of Comintern and domestic right-wing radicals. Nevertheless, Estonia also witnessed fratricide in the 1940s. The situation was harder for the Ukrainians. During wars and under a violent rule all the old wounds re-open and many new ones are inflicted; and Ukraine, in addition to its internal political and ideological conflicts, was home to many nationalities. Armia Krajowa, the Polish underground resistance movement, interfered alongside the Ukrainian Insurgent Army. Partisan units under the command of Sydir Kovpak were the extension of the Red Army. Moreover, the Waffen SS "Galizien" Division was formed in 1943 with the support of those members of OUN (supporters of Andrij Melnyk) who did not share the positions of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army's activists.

Several years ago exhibition stands dedicated to all these military formations still remained side-by-side in the Museum of Armed Forces of Ukraine, featuring only brief commentary.

During the German occupation millions of civilians were murdered or killed in Ukraine in addition to the victims of Holodomor and other mass repressions under the Stalin's regime. In the Russian Empire, the Right-Bank Ukraine was a part of the region where Jews were allowed to settle (so-called pale of settlement) and, thus, it had a sizable Jewish population. During World War II Ukraine was the scene of many mass murders committed under the Holocaust.

The figurehead of OUN and, later, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, was Stepan Bandera. The name "banderovtsy" is still used to stigmatize the most extreme Ukrainian nationalists. Bandera commanded Ukrainian units that participated in the conquer of Lviv at the end of June 1941, but future plans of the Third Reich did not envisage the Ukrainian state proclaimed by Bandera. Bandera was detained in Sachsenhausen concentration camp already in the summer of 1941, where he stayed until September of 1944. He was assassinated by a KGB agent in Munich in 1959.

The Soviet adventure fiction revelled in describing the clandestine operations of the Cold War. Naturally, the CIA was behind everything that was bad. *On the Banks of Tisza*, a book by the Soviet propaganda writer Alexander Avdeyenko, was translated into Estonian in 1957. The book was about KGB's operations against Ukrainian nationalists in Western Ukraine. Although Wolfgang Kasack, a German literary scholar, described his novels as "proper from the party perspective, but of low literary quality", *On the Banks of Tisza*, like adventure fiction is for the most part, was a page-turner. After all, literary quality is not always a measure of readability. Thus, the Estonian readership became aware of OUN and its CIA backers already half a century ago.

History does not repeat itself, but its patterns are similar.

Ukraine is much bigger than Estonia and the Soviet Union managed to finally quell the Ukrainian Insurgent Army only in the late 1950s. Thousands of captured "banderovtsy" filled GULAG's prison camps. Many Estonians who managed to survive these camps and return home remembered them in their stories and published memoirs.

We have heard many times that history should be left to historians, and I agree. The abuse of history have given rise to anger and violence. We have also heard that history does not repeat itself or if it does then as a farce only. It shall not mean history is not important. Studying the map of Ukraine's 2012 election results ([http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/54/Ukr\\_elections\\_2012\\_multimandate\\_oblasts.png](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/54/Ukr_elections_2012_multimandate_oblasts.png)), we see how they reflect the complex history of this state. Highlighted in different colours are lands that were incorporated into Russia before the partitions of Poland in the last quarter of the 18th century; the legacy of heavy industry centres founded in Luhansk and Donetsk by British industrialists Charles Gascoigne and John Hughes; the Black Sea Fleet's naval base in Mykolaiv built by the order of Catherine II; Galicia taken from Poland on the basis of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact as well as Northern Bukovina taken from Romania and Budjak (Stalin's gateway to Danube) merged later with Odessa oblast; Ruthenia, a multinational region with the Ukrainian majority that formerly belonged to Czechoslovakia and was incorporated by Stalin into the USSR in 1945; Crimea; and, finally, the Ukrainian diaspora on all continents.

History should not be harnessed to pull the wagon of a state or national identity as has been attempted many times both in the West and in the East. Such attempts are usually made when a scapegoat is needed to answer for all the miseries. Representation of historical events by states as the unquestionable truth, disputing of which is punishable, discredits history and demoralises historians. The "culture matters" rule applies here too. For us, history is ever-expanding knowledge of the past with all its black, white and grey areas, achieved through scientific research. For authoritarian states, history is just a tool always available to draw the line between friends and foes. The past can indeed be rewritten, as was pointed out already by George Orwell, but today it is within our power to prevent this from happening to us.

Politics never deals in historical inevitabilities, it is always done anew and political decisions in a democratic state reflect corresponding choices of the voters. It is true that history is never out of the picture completely, but it does not mean it shall have the final word. Ukraine is a big country and well-meaning/presumptuous shallow outside advice is not appropriate here. The world is too multifaceted for the existence of universal models to be emulated by any given state. One's future should be built with one's own hands.