Memory, Myth, and Monuments: The Commemoration of a Contested Past in Western Ukraine

John Lehr and Natalia Aponiuk
Abstract

In 2010, President Viktor Yushchenko’s posthumous award of the title ‘Hero of Ukraine’ to Stepan Bandera ignited a debate that threw memory and history into conflict. Bandera was the founder of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) whose military arm, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), or Ukrayins’ka Povstans’ka Armiya, fought for Ukrainian independence from 1942–1952. Initially it opposed German occupation forces in Ukraine, but following the German retreat it fought Soviet troops, at times controlling considerable territory in Western Ukraine. The UPA hoped to achieve an independent Ukrainian state and continued to conduct guerrilla warfare against the Soviets until 1952. A second arm of the OUN joined the German cause as a route to Ukrainian independence, enlisting in the Waffen-SS Division Halychyna. The UPA received strong support from the Ukrainian population, which regarded it as a liberating national organisation. Its opponents allege that it engaged in ethnic cleansing of Poles, and during the Nazi occupation actively collaborated in the murder and deportation of Jews. Many Western Ukrainians also fought as soldiers of the Soviet Red Army, playing a role in the liberation of Ukraine from Nazi control. During the period of Soviet administration from 1945 until 1991, when Ukraine achieved independence, an official landscape of commemoration was established that celebrated communist heroes and the sacrifices of the Red Army. Since independence the ‘monumental landscape’ has been transformed as monuments have been removed, added or altered to reflect the changing political fortunes of this historically contested area. In this landscape of commemoration three collective memories co-exist and compete: memories of the Soviet Red Army, the UPA, and the Halychyna Division.

Keywords: Ukraine, memorials, monuments, public commemoration, heritage, UPA, OUN, Soviet
Public landscapes of commemoration evolve through a complex interplay of social and political forces. In democratic societies, even though special interests may promote their own agendas, there is a measure of consensus involved in acts of public commemoration. Statues are raised in response to popular sentiment and often funded through public subscription. In authoritarian states the governing party determines who and what should be memorialised and celebrated as well as determining the size, location, and design of all memorials. In the latter case, memorials reflect the vision and ideology of the governing authority and not necessarily the sentiments of the population. Thus, when shifts in policy cause the past to be reappraised or contested, movements in the political landscape are quickly reflected in the commemorative landscape.

The historical memories of nations are seldom static. Many historians have noted that history is a process of reappraisal of the past and is constantly rewritten. As David Lowenthal states, individuals may have more than one identity, and so do social organisations and political entities.¹ As social attitudes, political perspectives and social orders shift, identities evolve. The past is then reassessed and reinterpreted, history is (re)written, and myths are created.

The relationship between memory, history, and myth is central to an understanding of the process of memorialisation. History is a discourse that involves debate and criticism; memory, on the other hand, is a process of selection, omission, and construction. Memory evolves and changes over time, repositioning events and actions to accord with the desired narrative. It can justify the past in a way that history cannot, for the shackles of evidence and the scrutiny of scholarship burden history. Memory is seldom challenged in the same way because it selects its own ‘facts’.

A consensus of memory constitutes the foundations of mythology. National and regional identities are constructed and closely intertwined with memory and mythology. The over-arching meta-narratives that provide the foundations of national myths may be challenged or supported by history, but they are built on memory. Memory selects and exaggerates to support a fixed way of looking at the world that is a core characteristic of the myth. As Edward de Bono has noted:

> A myth is a fixed way of looking at the world which cannot be destroyed because, looked at through the myth, all evidence supports that myth. Any fixed idea may seem nonsense to someone outside it, but it does absolutely nothing to alter the complete truth of that point of view to the person inside it.²

If a situation is viewed only from an established vantage point, nothing will provide a new vista. The field of vision determines its boundary and the answer will lie only within its confines.³ Put simply, this means that if we always think the way we have thought we will always do the things that we have done. Thus myths will endure, even when contradicted by the ‘facts’ of history.

The meaning ascribed to monuments therefore varies according to the perspectives of the observer and the social, economic, and political contexts of the day. Since these cannot be fixed, time becomes a critical element affecting the way
in which society, in a broad sense, perceives any monument. If left in place, they become a physical record of the dominant political perspectives prevailing at any given time, and their removal, relocation or reconfiguration similarly records the shifting sands of memory and political orthodoxy.

Ukraine: identity and memory

This article examines the complex and often confusing relationship that Western Ukraine retains with its turbulent history, a relationship that is contained in its evolving landscapes of memory. Ukraine’s lack of easily defendable borders and its productive agricultural lands have made it a prize coveted by a host of powers. Many countries, including Turkey, Sweden, Russia, Austria, Germany, and Poland, have claimed all or parts of the country as part of their imperial territories. Ukraine’s western provinces of Galicia and Bukovyna have been especially contested and since 1914 have fallen under Austrian, Polish, Romanian, German, and Soviet control. Perhaps because of exposure to western concepts of nationalism in the latter half of the nineteenth century while under Austrian control, Western Ukraine became noted for its fervent Ukrainian nationalism.

At the end of World War I, and the resulting collapse and break-up of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Ukraine enjoyed a brief period of independence. By 1922, the Red Army had regained control of Greater Ukraine, Poland had assumed control of Galicia, and Romania took control of Bukovyna. In Galicia, Ukrainian nationalism smouldered under Polish occupation for two decades. During this time Stefan Bandera founded the OUN with the objective of securing Ukrainian independence. When Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union occupied Poland in 1939, Galicia fell under Soviet control, becoming a part of the USSR under the terms of the Nazi-Soviet pact.

Nationalist sentiments in Galicia were ruthlessly suppressed by the Soviets. Thousands were arrested, tortured, murdered, or deported to Siberian prison camps. Western Ukrainians were filled with revulsion for the Soviets and maintained a deep conviction that they were, and always would be, “their worst enemy”. The invasion of the Soviet Union by Germany in 1941 brought the promise of Ukraine’s liberation from Soviet tyranny. Many in Western Ukraine thus initially welcomed the Nazis, hoping that the expulsion of the communist regime would pave the way for the creation of a Ukrainian national state.

A sovereign Ukrainian state was declared in L’viv on 30 June 1941, but Nazi authorities arrested its supporters and suppressed the movement. Ukrainians who hoped for a degree of independence under German rule were soon disillusioned by Nazi policies. In 1942, this spawned the appearance of a military formation, the UPA, a guerrilla army that at its height fielded some 50,000 men armed with captured German and Soviet weapons. The UPA operated principally in the mountainous and forested regions of Western Ukraine where the population was
overwhelmingly supportive of its political aims. The UPA fought German troops, engaging and repelling the Wehrmacht and SS units at the battalion and regimental level. Soviet partisans were also engaged and pushed out of UPA territory.

Thousands of Ukrainians from Galicia, as well as members of the OUN, volunteered to serve with the 14th Grenadier Waffen-SS Division Halychyna after its establishment in 1943. The creation of the division was supported by many Ukrainians who saw potential for the formation of a Ukrainian national army, one that would fight Bolshevism and work towards national liberation. Many joined the division hoping that Soviet defeat would lead to an independent Ukraine. Others simply sought military training with the view to uniting with the UPA to expel foreign forces from Ukrainian territory. The division was decimated when surrounded by numerically superior Soviet forces at the battle of Brody in 1944. Reformed, and renamed the 1st Ukrainian Division, it fought rearguard actions in Czechoslovakia and Austria before surrendering to the British in 1945. This unit fought only on the Eastern front against Soviet Army units and communist partisans. In contrast, UPA units saw Soviet Ukrainian soldiers as potential recruits to the cause and, whenever possible, they directed their activities against the mostly Russian NKVD troops.

Following the retreat of German forces from Western Ukraine, the UPA fought incoming Soviet forces in pitched battles and conducted guerrilla warfare throughout Galicia until the early 1950s. At times the UPA maintained de facto control of large tracts of Pollisia, Volhynia, and Galicia, providing school and hospital services and even publishing several newspapers for some years. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, despite the commitment of 70,000 NKVD troops to the conflict, Soviet authorities were unable to contain UPA activities in Western Ukraine. To deprive the UPA of its base of support in the countryside, millions of Ukrainians were deported from Western Ukraine to areas firmly under Soviet control in Eastern Ukraine and Kazakhstan.

After the pacification of Western Ukraine in 1952, a positive memory of the OUN and UPA lingered only in the minds of the Western Ukrainian population and in the collective consciousness of Ukrainians abroad. Soviet authorities portrayed OUN members and UPA fighters as Nazi sympathisers and collaborators who aided the Nazis in their campaigns against the Jews. The UPA and the SS Division Halychyna were conflated in Soviet propaganda; no mention was made of UPA actions against Nazi occupation forces. UPA units were alleged to have participated in the ethnic cleansing of Poles from areas that the UPA considered ethnically Ukrainian territory.

In the war to discredit the UPA, Soviet NKVD units dressed in UPA uniforms committed atrocities against Ukrainian villagers; an unconvincing tactic since few Ukrainians believed that the UPA would alienate its own supporters. The degree of popular support for the UPA was sufficient for Soviet authorities to resort to mass deportations of the peasantry from areas where they operated. This heavy-handed attempt to eliminate the UPA’s support base further alienated those left in
the region and constituted a powerful component of collective memory that was geographically and socially contained. It is often forgotten that the UPA drew its membership from all parts of Ukraine and many Red Army soldiers also became UPA members. Nevertheless, the commitment of Western Ukrainians to the idea of national sovereignty, and their readiness to challenge the Soviet Union, distinguished them from their countrymen in Eastern Ukraine who had been under Russian rule since the eighteenth century.

After the UPA demobilised, the official Soviet heroes were the founding members of the Communist Party and Red Army soldiers who fell during the Great Patriotic War. Memory of the UPA was suppressed or distorted in official Soviet histories, while in the Ukrainian diaspora memory of the SS Division Halychyna was suppressed. The myth of the UPA as the true heroes survived in the consciousness of Western Ukrainians alone.

Landscapes of memory in Western Ukraine

In the former Soviet Union memorials commemorating Soviet combatants killed during World War II were intended to frame the conflict in terms of a struggle for national survival. It was the Great Patriotic War. For political reasons the concepts of ‘Soviet’, ‘nation’, and ‘Russian’ were frequently conflated. In the post-war Soviet discourse, losses suffered from 1941–1945 validated the legitimacy of the system. Its memorials were vital political tools in the execution of this policy.

These concepts are all germane to the thesis of this article: that the new landscapes of commemoration now emerging in Ukraine are both the visible manifestation of contested memory and vital weapons in the struggle for the dominance of rival mythologies of national identity. Heritage revisionism, as seen in the landscapes of the Cheremosh and Prut Valleys in Western Ukraine, is used as a broadly representative example of this process of contested memory in post-communist Ukraine. There is a highly complex landscape of memory and mythology contained within its memorials and monuments. It reflects a convoluted political history and 40 years of conflating Ukrainian nationalism with Ukrainian communism by the Communist Party.

Monuments in Western Ukraine during the Soviet era

Regimes appropriate space through placement of their symbols and icons in the landscape, through control of toponymy, and the fabrication of national myths. In the towns and villages of Western Ukraine, as elsewhere in the Soviet Union, the communist regime placed statues of Lenin in prominent positions, usually in front of the local administration building or, in the smaller centres, before quasi-official buildings such as the Palace of Culture. As often as not, such statues were set in
squares or boulevards that bore Lenin’s name. As the founder of the Soviet state, Lenin represented both Soviet homogeny and communist orthodoxy. His presence, even if purely symbolic, was an affirmation of Soviet and communist authority and a symbolic denial of Ukrainian national aspirations.

In the 1960s, during the Brezhnev era, the Soviet Union erected thousands of memorials to commemorate members of the Soviet army killed during the Great Patriotic War. Scarcely a village in Ukraine lacks some sort of Soviet memorial, either to the army units that drove out the German occupation forces or to its community members who died serving with the Red Army. Ukraine was not unusual since in the mid-1960s the Soviet regime created what Nina Tumarkin has called a cult of World War II, and with the 20 million Soviet war dead remembered with “a ritualized epithet that signified the war mythology”. Across the Soviet Union memorials celebrated the huge losses endured by its people during the Great Patriotic War.

The use of these memorials for obvious political ends backfired to a certain extent in the 1970s when crass official attempts to manipulate emotions and loyalties inspired a callous derision to the cult of sacrifice in war among the young. In Western Ukraine this was exacerbated by the region’s convoluted political history and the population’s complex relationship with Soviet monuments, for not only did thousands of conscripts from Western Ukrainian villages die fighting in Soviet units, where casualty rates were often horrific, but thousands served in UPA units. Thousands more died serving in the SS Division Halychyna.

The attitude of the population of Western Ukraine toward the Soviet Army is thus highly complex. In the village of Kryven’ke, in Ternopil’ Oblast, a memorial to local people killed fighting in the Red Army, the UPA, the SS Division Halychyna or because they were supporters of OUN, illustrates the conflicts of colliding mythologies where villagers served on all sides of the conflict. The Red Army represented liberation from Nazi oppression, but its victories paved the way for the communist regime that extinguished nationalist aspirations; the UPA and the SS Division Halychyna promised different routes to independence.

The commemorative landscape in 2008

Almost 20 years after the break-up of the Soviet Union and the realisation of Ukrainian independence, a new landscape of commemoration is emerging in Western Ukraine. Following a reconnaissance of Western Ukrainian districts in June-July 2005, June 2006 and July 2008, all memorials along the route from the village of Stari Kuty to the town of Snyatyn in the former province of Galicia (now in Ivano-Frankivsk Oblast in the Cheremosh and Prut Valleys respectively) were surveyed, inventoried, digitally recorded, and categorised by the authors. This route, approximately 32 kilometres in length, passes through several linear villages that sprawl along the road, forming a non-contiguous line of settlement that hosted some 34 monuments and memorials.
Information about their dates of placement and modification was sought from local residents, and in some cases was obtained from the memorials themselves. In most instances, although informants were willing to provide what information they could, they did not wish to be identified. The issues embodied in the act of placing a memorial are still highly political; the topic remains very sensitive and the political future unclear.

Four types of monument or memorial were identified in the study transect: nine Soviet war memorials, 15 memorials to the UPA and the OUN, eight monuments celebrating national figures in the arts or pre-Soviet politics, and two protest monuments. Soviet war and UPA memorials were by far the most common.

**Soviet war memorials**

In the principal cities of the former Soviet Union war memorials are grand affairs, for example, the Soviet war memorial in the provincial city of L’viv. Even though it pales in comparison with the gargantuan memorial in Kyiv that towers over the city, it is an imposing piece of sculpture in the rather formulaic and bombastic style favoured by the Soviet bureaucracy. In rural areas Soviet memorials are generally simpler, ranging from a single column to a plinth bearing a statue of a Soviet soldier in a heroic pose, brandishing a sub-machine gun. The names of those killed in action are inscribed below.
Other memorials are simple red granite walls with the names of the fallen inscribed in gilded letters and surmounted with the inscription: “Eternal Glory to the Heroes”. Before the wall the apparatus for an eternal flame, ironically no longer burning, stands as a silent reminder that times have changed.

Many Soviet era memorials are contested. The Ukrainian Catholic Church, suppressed during that period, has sought to appropriate Soviet space by placing a cross atop or in front of Soviet memorials. In Slobitka in 1992, according to a local informant, immediately after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, villagers wanted a celebratory church service to be held at the war memorial. However, the priest refused to hold a religious service in a non-consecrated place. A cross was hurriedly placed in front of the memorial and the location sanctified by the priest.
Flanking the memorial, a new low circular wall of grey stone commemorates those who fell during the conflict that lasted in this area from 1941 until 1952. While a Soviet star is etched above the names of the Red Army soldiers; there is no emblem above the names of the UPA soldiers. No attempt has been made to segregate the names of the Soviet fallen from the names of the UPA dead. In other locations, Soviet memorials have been appropriated through the addition of Christian symbols such as crosses and angels, which have been placed around the memorial site or on the memorial.
Memorials to the UPA

Almost immediately after Ukraine became independent in 1991, Soviet symbols were removed from official buildings and replaced with the national insignia of the country. Monuments to those who fell serving with the UPA, or who were killed because Soviet authorities suspected them of being UPA or OUN supporters, were erected in 1992 and thereafter. UPA monuments are almost always in the form of a high mound, replicating the burial mounds of the Cossacks and linking the UPA with the age-old struggle for Ukrainian independence.

The mound is surmounted with a cross and the Ukrainian trident. Every Soviet memorial inventoried in the study transect between Kuty and Snyatyn had a UPA counterpart. Not coincidentally they were placed either adjacent to, or opposite, pre-existing Soviet memorials. Names, dates of death, and sometimes photographic portraits of the fallen, are displayed. However, the UPA memorials seemingly avoid any connection with the former regime by eschewing sculptured figures in heroic poses brandishing assault rifles.

In the minds of many Ukrainian nationalists the fight waged by the UPA was simply one element of a longer struggle for national identity and political independence. In the village of Dzhuriv, for example, villagers erected an imposing mound in 1999 that is crowned with the cross and trident placed opposite to and dwarfing an older Soviet war memorial. The mound commemorates the UPA fallen, those who died fighting for an independent Ukraine from 1914 onwards, and the post-war victims of Soviet repression. A plaque at the base of the mound lists the members of the Sich Riflemen (Sichovi stril’tsi), soldiers who fought against the Poles in 1919, as well as civilians who were deported by the Soviets and perished in the Gulag.

As befits its status as a popular movement that drew its strength from local support, the UPA’s monuments seldom commemorate a specific individual. Only
Memorial to cultural figures

During the Soviet era, communist authorities erected a number of monuments to Ukrainian national figures who predated the regime. For the most part these were artists and writers who had a connection with Ukraine or the region. The Ukrainian writer and poet, Taras Shevchenko, for example, was a Ukrainian national figure and cultural icon who was acceptable to the regime. His lowly origins as a serf in pre-revolutionary Ukraine made it easy for him to be appropriated as a figure representing the egalitarian ideals of the Communist Party. As such, Soviet administrators saw his presence as apolitical, although among Ukrainians he is generally regarded as a symbol of Ukrainian national identity. Regardless of their origins, Shevchenko memorials can be regarded as expressions of Ukrainian national pride.

Protest monuments

Monuments protesting the crimes of Soviet authorities are now commonly encountered throughout Ukraine. In the parts of the country that were under Soviet rule from the early 1920s, most of these monuments recall the horrors of the artificially induced famine (holodomor) that accompanied forced collectivisation in the 1930s. Areas that were under Polish control until 1939 did not experience the famine. Protest monuments in Western Ukraine focus therefore on the harsh treatment meted out by the Soviets to all they suspected of nationalist sympathies. Memorials to the “victims of communist oppression” or to the “children of
Ukraine", a metaphorical allusion to nationalists who suffered for their devotion to the cause of Ukrainian independence, are placed outside many villages. Occasionally such sentiments are embedded within memorials to the UPA fallen as at Tuchapy. Here a plaque on the mound commemorates “the victims of the communist terror” alongside plaques that list the names of local people killed while fighting as members of the UPA or who were executed for supporting the OUN.

Not all commemoration was through conventional memorials. In the village of Popel’nyky a small, traditional peasant house was converted into a museum as a memorial to all those deported to Siberia for their nationalist sympathies. According to local people, in the 1940s and 1950s the Soviet secret police held people there before deporting them.
Figure 9. This monument in the Cheremosh Valley commemorates members of the OUN and UPA killed 1939–1952. The stela on the left commemorates the “victims of the communist butchers”.

The house, positioned on the principal street of the village, is one of several memorials, all with Ukrainian nationalist themes, which line the street almost without interruption for approximately 200 metres.

Figure 10. The house, now a commemorative museum, where inhabitants of the Tuchapy area were held before deportation to Siberia.

Conclusion

Throughout Eastern Europe the excision of the communist period has been facilitated by the shallowness of Bolshevism’s own historical roots. Just as Soviet
communism strove to erase Christian temporalities and to replace them with its own rhythms and festivals, it attempted spatial appropriation of Western Ukrainian territory by building its own iconography into the landscape. Memorials may not carry the same emotional weight as a place of burial, but they are still powerful icons, reifying space, nurturing memory, and supporting national myths.

Catherine Wanner has argued that the Ukrainian population has internalised national identity; consequently, violence against Ukrainian culture, and its practises and customs, is commonly equated with violence against the self. From this it follows that the population more strongly rejects those regimes that offered violence to the nation than it does those that simply projected violence against the individual. Soviet campaigns of “Russification” aimed at homogenisation of the Soviet Union’s peoples were thus interpreted by Ukrainian nationalists as direct attacks on the ethnic integrity of Ukraine, aimed at erasing the country’s national identity. Removal of Soviet political symbols contrasts with the respect shown to Soviet war memorials. It is this that makes the process of rewriting Western Ukraine’s commemorative landscape unusual. There was no concerted effort to obliterate all memorials of the former regime, as occurred in Germany under the Nazis (1933-1945) and the victorious Allies in 1945. Nevertheless, along the valley of the Cheremosh River the appropriation of Soviet war memorials and the erection of new monuments is both a protest against Soviet memory and a rejection of their historiography.

This silent protest is made more powerful by the respect shown by the local population to the war memorials of the former regime that are still accorded the status of sacred places. This stands in stark contrast to the contempt shown to the secular symbols of the Soviet regime, whether they are communist insignia or monuments to its political heroes. All that now remains of the statue of Lenin that stood since the 1950s outside the Palace of Culture in the village of Kabaka is a plinth of red granite.

Figure 11. Until 1991 Lenin stood on this plinth outside the Palace of Culture in Kabaka, Ivano-Frankiv’ska Oblast
It is a telling metaphor, reminding all that, like the figure that once stood there, the Soviet regime is no more.

Endnotes

2 Edward de Bono, PO, Beyond Yes and No (London, Penguin Books, 1990), 117.
3 de Bono, Beyond Yes and No, 100.
9 OUN’s members were split between followers of Bandera (OUN b) and those of Melnyk (OUN m). During the war Melnyk’s supporters advocated collaboration as the road to achieving their political aims and Bandera’s supporters favoured independent action. Both were strongly anti-Soviet.
13 Nina Tumarkin. The Living and the Dead: The Rise and Fall of the Cult of World War II in Russia (New York, Basic Books, 1994).
14 Tumarkin. Living and the Dead, 135.
15Tumarkin, Living and the Dead, 156-57.


17Professor Andriy Hornjatkevič, 26 February 2001, University of Alberta, Edmonton Alberta, Canada, personal communication to John Lehr.

18The terms “memorial” and “monument” are generally considered synonymous. The two terms are used here to differentiate between memorials commemorating victims of war or political oppression and monuments celebrating political or cultural achievements.


20Rudy Koshar, From Monuments to Traces: Artifacts of German Memory 1870-1990 (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2000), 123.

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**Biographical notes**

John Lehr is a Professor in the Department of Geography at the University of Winnipeg. He is a historical geographer whose research has focused on pioneer agricultural settlements and memory and meaning in cultural landscapes. He maintains regional research interests in western Canada, Brazil, Israel, and Ukraine.

Email: j.lehr@uwinnipeg.ca

Natalia Aponiuk is Senior Scholar in the Department of German and Slavic Studies at the University of Manitoba. She is a specialist in Russian, Ukrainian, and Ukrainian Canadian literature. Her research interests also include ethnic identity in minority groups. She is editor of Canadian Ethnic Studies/Etudes Ethniques au Canada.

Email: aponiuk@cc.umanitoba.ca