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**“Banderites” vs. “New Russia”**

**The Battle Field of History in the Ukraine Conflict**

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## Introduction: The Poppy

In May 2014, a new historical symbol made its way to Ukraine. Right ahead of the traditional Victory Day celebrations, the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory (UINM) and public broadcaster NTVU presented a black-and-red remembrance poppy as a new way to remember the war dead. This “European symbol” would be used at official ceremonies, said the press release of UINM, a government structure. Its director Volodymyr Viatrovych hastened to add that the poppy was also rooted in Ukrainian tradition: “in our folk songs, poppies blossom where Cossack blood has been spilled.”<sup>1</sup>

The move came as a surprise for Ukrainians. Never had they associated poppies with the Second World War. Nor was it true that the poppy was “the European symbol” for remembering that war. The remembrance poppy had its roots in North America and predated the Second World War. In Europe, it was widely used in one country only – the U.K. It was virtually unknown elsewhere.

There was no doubt, however, that a new symbol was needed, and this had to do with a new war which raged in Eastern Ukraine. Pro-Russian fighters in Crimea and Donbass had adopted the black-and-orange “St. George’s ribbon” as their symbol. This ribbon was initially a popular symbol for victory in the Second World War. It originated from neighbouring Russia, where it had been heavily promoted by official structures over the last decade. But now the meaning of the ribbon had changed, at least in Ukraine: Instead of symbolising victory over Nazi Germany, it now symbolised the fight against Kiev, or both. The new powers in Kiev clearly needed an alternative symbol, and came up with the poppy.

This episode of May 2014 says a lot about the conflict that is going on in Ukraine. As always, war is fought in the symbolic field as well as on the battlefield; and in the Ukrainian case, remembrance of the Second World War was at the very centre of this symbolic war. History, it seems, has itself become the battlefield.

Moscow and its pro-Russian supporters in Eastern Ukraine had managed to make a powerful association between 1945 and 2014; for them, the new government in Kiev was identical with the enemy of 70 years ago, just in new disguise. It was a “fascist junta” which sent its “death squads” to commit “genocide”, went the argument on all Kremlin TV channels. The St. George’s ribbon was a way of showing where you stood, and who would win in this fight.

This narrative, absurd as it sounds, proved extremely powerful in its simplicity. The new powers in Kiev needed a similarly simple and convincing narrative to counter it. They had a simple story to tell of Ukraine’s future, by displaying EU flags, but not of its past. That was a problem of Ukraine as a whole, not just of the new government. More than two decades after the country’s independence from Moscow, it was still struggling to construct a common historical identity. Memories of the war were divided: While most Ukrainians had relatives who fought in the Soviet Army, there was a different tradition in the far West of the country. There, Ukrainian nationalists had fought against the

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<sup>1</sup> [www.memory.gov.ua/news/ukraina-zgaduvatime-poleglikh-u-drugii-svitovii-viini-pid-evropeiskim-simvolom-chervonim-makom](http://www.memory.gov.ua/news/ukraina-zgaduvatime-poleglikh-u-drugii-svitovii-viini-pid-evropeiskim-simvolom-chervonim-makom)

Soviet Union, partly in alliance with German troops. Any narrative of the nation's past had to integrate these conflicting memories.

That was exactly what the promoters of the poppy claimed to do. They appealed to the "European" choice of Ukraine, which should include its remembrance culture. Instead of celebrating a Soviet-style victory cult, Ukraine would choose the values of reconciliation and inclusiveness.

But of course, the poppy was itself a powerful move on the battlefield of memory. It was clearly no coincidence that it had the same red-and-black colours as the flag of the "Ukrainian Insurgent Army" – an ultra-nationalist flag which had only just become popular at the Maidan demonstrations. This association was obvious, but not made explicit at the presentation. So while the poppy was officially presented as a western, "European" way of remembering victory over Nazi Germany, it in fact sent a mixed message, by silently appealing to local traditions.

This was part of a broader project to break out of the Soviet past and de-sovietise Ukrainian history. Symbolically, Lenin statues in central Ukraine were toppled by nationalist groups at this time – a somewhat bizarre phenomenon, since Leninism had been defeated already two decades earlier. In April 2015, parliament approved a set of radical "history laws". They stipulated the removal of any Soviet symbols and names throughout Ukraine – a gargantuan task in a country which had lived seven decades under Soviet rule.

Ukraine was not the only former Soviet republic where new elites wanted to rewrite and reinterpret their own history. With the break-up of the Soviet Union, the common past had started falling apart as well. But for some nations, it was easier to break out of the Soviet narrative. The Baltic States could hark back to the interwar period, when they had already gained independence, and write off the Soviet period as a time of occupation. In Central Asia, the end of the Soviet Union could be seen as the end of colonial rule. But could Ukrainians claim to have been "occupied" or "colonised" by Soviet Russia? Their history was more closely connected to Russian history, and this connection dated back to the middle ages.

The intricacies of the pre-Soviet past came to the surface when Moscow and pro-Moscow separatists in Eastern Ukraine started using the term "Novorossiya", or "New Russia", to designate the entire south-east of present-day Ukraine. A half-forgotten expression of the 18<sup>th</sup> century for the lands north of the Black Sea was suddenly turned into a propaganda slogan for fighting Kiev. If the Saint-George's ribbon was an attempt to undermine the historical legitimacy of the new Kiev government, the Novorossiya claim was an attempt to undermine the historical legitimacy of the Ukrainian state in its Soviet borders.

I will try in this paper to describe the historical arguments used explicitly and implicitly in the Ukrainian conflict; to show how history itself was turned into a battlefield and the various attacks and counterattacks that were launched there. It is a story about conflicting historical myths. In everyday usage a "myth" is used in the sense of a "lie" or a mistaken belief. This is not what I mean here. A historical myth is a simple and powerful story people share about the past to make sense of their present existence. It is a story that is considered as meaningful by a community, and helps to assert its collective identity and values.

Historical myths are not necessarily factually wrong representations of the past. But since they are not about historical objectivity, but about political significance, every myth has to tell the past in a

specific way. It structures the past and defines which events and heroes are to be remembered, and which are left out of the picture. Myths are a constituent part of collective memory. They can be (and are increasingly) analysed by historians, even though historiography itself shares some features with historical myth-making. History is always about making sense of the past, and about choosing which past events are meaningful for us today.<sup>2</sup>

I will cover the field going backwards in time: I shall start with the debates about the Second World War and the “fascism” accusation. In a second step, I will describe the battles about how to reinterpret the Soviet past. Finally, I will address the rewriting of pre-soviet imperial history. I shall argue that arguments relating to the war were by far the most powerful ones, but that the debate about the tsarist past is what sets this conflict apart from all previous such conflicts in post-soviet space. Its repercussions are much wider. Vladimir Putin has repeatedly said in public that he considers Russians and Ukrainians to be “one people”. How are territorial claims between nations justified if these nations are in fact one whole? The attempts to fragment the imperial past and define its Ukrainian and Russian components are changing the identity of both societies. This is where the debate about Ukraine becomes a debate about Russia.

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<sup>2</sup> There is a rich theoretical literature about collective memory (a term invented by the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs), but Peter Novick’s influential book about Holocaust remembrance in the United States shows best how it is studied in practice. (Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, Boston 1999).

## 2. Banderites – or the perfect enemy

### The Maidan turns red and black

On a wet night in November 2013, I stood on Kiev's Independence Square. A crowd of a few hundred people had gathered, most of them young. This was the third night of protests after the Ukrainian government had announced a sudden shift in its foreign policy: It had shelved an association agreement with the European Union just days before it was to be signed. For those assembled on the square, the agreement had embodied the hope to draw the country closer to the west, to get rid of corruption and Russian-style authoritarianism. But the crowd was far from impressive. On the nearby streets traffic went on as usual. Kiev, a city of 3 million inhabitants, did not seem to take much notice of the demonstrators.

In the crowd, I noticed a small group of people who stood out. They did not wave the Ukrainian and EU flags other demonstrators had brought. They had come with a red-and-black flag. This was the flag of the "Ukrainian Insurgent Army", a nationalist guerrilla movement from the times of the Second World War. The flag was popular with football fans from Western Ukraine and with radical nationalists. I saw one of the organisers of the pro-EU-meeting walking over to the group. It had been agreed there should be no party symbols, he said; would they please remove the flag? The nationalists refused. This was just a patriotic flag, they said, "and we have to honour our heroes". "People have various heroes. Your heroes are not everybody's heroes", the organiser replied and walked away frustrated.

It seemed to me a minor incident at the time. Only much later did I understand that I had witnessed the beginnings of an ominous trend – the emergence of a nationalist undercurrent in a democratic protest movement.

Stoked by the clumsy and sometimes brutal reaction of the government, this movement grew rapidly. Tents went up on Independence square, bonfires were lit, barricades were erected. At the entrances of the camp city, men in self-made armour stood guard. It all started to look like a history fair, a collective re-enactment of some medieval battle. And the longer it lasted, the more did I see those same symbols that had been an exception on the first small student rally. Red-and-black flags became a common sight, and a new organisation called "Right Sector" had adopted them as their symbol. Next to the scene for the speakers, a big portrait of Stepan Bandera, a wartime Ukrainian nationalist leader, went up. Most surprisingly, at the end of each speech the crowd would shout the slogan "Glory to Ukraine!" – "Glory to the Heroes!" Some young people even chose the more radical versions "Glory to the nation – Death to the enemies!", or "Ukraine – above all!" These were nationalist slogans of the 1930s and 1940s which had only survived in football stadiums, where they were used by "Ultras" especially from Western Ukraine. The greetings had some time been accompanied by raising your right arm on the model of the fascist greetings used by Hitler's and Mussolini's followers.<sup>3</sup> But nobody seemed worried. Did people not know, or not care?

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<sup>3</sup> The greeting "Glory to Ukraine" was older. But the ritualised form with the answer "Glory to the heroes" (and raising your arm) was made compulsory on the OUN-B's congress in German occupied Cracow in April 1941.

On Sundays, when there were demonstrations of several hundred thousand people, it became clear that radical nationalists were only a fraction of the protesters. There were just too many people in Ukraine who resented President Viktor Yanukovich and his way of amassing power and wealth. His ouster, not EU association, had become the main goal, and it had massive support.

In February 2014, after three months of protests and some bloody clashes between police and protesters, Yanukovich fled the capital. He resurfaced later in Russian exile. His overthrow set off a chain of dramatic events, including the annexation of Crimea by Russia and a war in the Donbass area with direct Russian intervention.

But what exactly had brought down Yanukovich? That depended on what you wanted to see. Western media talked of peaceful pro-democracy protests, which had turned violent only after the authoritarian regime had resorted to force. This version of events dismissed the fact that some protesters were less interested in democracy than in identity politics, and were quite willing to use violence.

Russian state-controlled media turned the story around: They described the Euromaidan as a violent coup d'état of some hard-core (and US-supported) nationalists, who had used pro-democracy protests as a cover. This version dismissed the brutal attacks on protesters by Yanukovich supporters and police, as well as the intentions of the vast majority of protesters. Those far-right politicians that Russian media saw as main actors on the Maidan (like the leaders of the "Svoboda" and "Right Sector" parties, Oleh Tyahnybok and Dmytro Yarosh) got almost no support in the presidential elections later that year, even in strongholds of the protest movements.<sup>4</sup>

There was, of course, not just a difference in perception. Russian state-controlled TV had a clear political agenda: Calling the post-Maidan government in Kiev a "fascist junta" was a way of delegitimising it, and justifying the annexation of Crimea. Crimea "will never be Banderite", said President Vladimir Putin in March.<sup>5</sup> The same argument could be used to stoke armed conflict in the Donbass: It raised emotions and transformed a political conflict into a war between good and evil. If the Kiev government was a fascist junta, then clearly you had every right to take up arms.

But then the question remains, what made this radical narrative acceptable to many viewers and listeners? It all hinged on the person of Bandera and the "Banderites" or "Banderovtsy". Bandera symbolised a fundamental rift in the collective memory of the war between Russia and Ukraine, and even inside Ukraine. There were different ways of remembering, celebrating, talking about the past. These differences had not only to do with different experiences during the war. The perspectives on the past had changed as well, and they had done so in different ways. Bandera had come to mean different things to different groups – a symbol of fascism to some, of national independence to others.

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Grzegorz Rossolinski-Liebe, Stepan Bandera. *The Life and Afterlife of a Ukrainian Nationalist. Fascism, Genocide, and Cult*, Stuttgart 2014, p. 180.

<sup>4</sup> Tyahnybok and Yarosh got 1.16 and 0.70 percent of the vote nationwide. Even their best regional results were abysmal: 1.92 percent (Tyahnybok in Volhynia) and 1.27 percent (Yarosh in Kiev).

<sup>5</sup> Address in the Kremlin on the issue of Crimea, 18<sup>th</sup> march 2014, [kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/20603](http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/20603)

## The first Banderite

Stepan Bandera came from a region where Ukrainian nationalism was particularly strong, and Russian influence weak.<sup>6</sup> He was born in 1909 in Galicia, the only part of present-day Ukraine which lay outside tsarist Russia. Galicia was a poor border region of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. In the complex ethnic hierarchy of the Habsburg empire the Ukrainian peasants of Galicia ranked low (below the local Poles), but they enjoyed civil liberties which the tsars did not concede to their kin across the border.

While Bandera was a boy, the First World War raged through his village of Stary Uhryniv, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire fell apart. Bandera's father – a village priest of the Greek-catholic church – was among those Galician Ukrainians who tried to seize the moment and establish a Ukrainian state. Instead, Galicia became part of a new Polish nation state.

Young Bandera made the dream of Ukrainian independence the goal of his life. He joined a radical group called "Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists" and rose quickly through its ranks. The OUN's aim was "national revolution", its foe the Warsaw government, its method terrorism. In 1934, OUN nationalists killed the Polish interior minister in the centre of the capital. The two court trials which followed this murder made Bandera famous. "Our idea", he said in the courtroom in Lviv, "is so huge that, as it comes to its realisation, not hundreds but thousands of human lives have to be sacrificed in order to carry it out."<sup>7</sup>

Bandera spent five years in Polish prisons. He was freed only when Poland was invaded by Nazi Germany in September 1939. But since Hitler and Stalin were allies, and the Soviet Union had invaded Eastern Poland, he could not return to his home region. Unlike the Nazis, the Soviets had no sympathies for "bourgeois nationalists". Like other Ukrainian nationalists, Bandera settled in the city of Cracow, where the German "General Governor" of Poland resided. There, he managed in 1940 to rise to the top of the nationalist movement, by splitting the OUN into two factions and heading the bigger and more radical one. This was when the term "Banderovtsy" was coined for his faction, the "OUN-B" (where B stood for "Bandera") as opposed to the "OUN-M" (where M stood for Andriy Melnyk, the older and less radical OUN leader).

In Cracow, Bandera and his followers waited and prepared for a future war between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Two Ukrainian battalions were formed within the Abwehr (German military intelligence) as the core of a future Ukrainian army. Detailed instructions were developed of how to establish the OUN-B's rule in territories invaded by the Germans, and how to deal with minorities considered enemies – "Muscovites" (Russians), Jews, Poles.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> In the following, I rely mainly on Rossolinski-Liebe's work on Bandera – the first academic biography for decades.

<sup>7</sup> Rossolinski-Liebe, p. 160.

<sup>8</sup> These minorities would be "destroyed in the struggle". The document "The struggle and activities of the OUN in Wartime" is cited in Rossolinski-Liebe, pp.182 ff.



On 30<sup>th</sup> June 1941, one week after Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union, Ukrainian soldiers in German uniforms (the two Abwehr battalions) entered the capital of Eastern Galicia, Lviv. They were enthusiastically met by Ukrainian inhabitants. The same evening the OUN-B proclaimed the "reestablishment of a Ukrainian state". This state, they declared officially, would "closely collaborate with the National Socialist Great Germany, which, under the leadership of Adolf Hitler, is creating a new order in Europe and the world". The declaration coincided with massive pogroms against Jewish inhabitants of Lviv. They were perpetrated by Germans and by the local Ukrainian militia which the OUN-B had formed. Jews – together with Poles the largest ethnic group in Lviv – were collectively accused of having supported the brutal Soviet regime.

At this moment, however, history took a sudden turn which Bandera's men had not expected. They had hoped Nazi Germany would react to the Lviv proclamation the same way it had reacted to the proclamation of an independent Croatian state two months earlier. The Ustasha state, proclaimed by Croatian fascists a week after Germany's attack on Yugoslavia, had been recognised by the Axis powers. Even earlier, Germany had granted independence to Slovakia.

Instead, the Germans arrested Bandera. The Nazi leadership had other plans for Ukraine than for Croatia or Slovakia, and it considered Bandera – whom they had not even allowed to travel to Lviv – a troublemaker. He was taken into "honourable captivity" ("Ehrenhaft") and then released to live in Berlin. The Nazi leadership especially disliked the infighting among supposedly loyal Ukrainian nationalists. When members of the more obedient OUN-M were killed, presumably by the rival OUN-B, Bandera was arrested again in September 1941. This time it was for good. He spent the next three years in Berlin, some of it in a privileged section of the Sachsenhausen concentration camp. The OUN-B had to go underground. German Einsatzgruppen were told to shoot OUN-B-members in secret as looters.<sup>9</sup>

This was a crucial moment in Bandera's life and explains his ambiguous reputation. The leader of a fascist movement which fought alongside Nazi Germany suddenly became a symbol of resistance to the Germans. And because Bandera spent most of the war in prison he could not be personally accused of many atrocities his followers committed. In spring 1943, the OUN-B's military arm – the Ukrainian Insurgent Army – started killing tens of thousands of Polish villagers in Volhynia. By preemptively "cleansing" an ethnically mixed region, they wanted to make sure it would not fall to Poland after the war, as it had done a generation before.

Also, many of the UPA's fighters were former members of the Ukrainian police units under German command. When these policemen deserted to the UPA, they brought their experience in rounding up civilians for mass killing. The UPA itself also killed Jews which had escaped deportation by the Germans and were hiding in the woods. Other Jews were made to work for the UPA.<sup>10</sup>

Ironically, the OUN-B leadership officially guaranteed the "equality of all citizens of Ukraine" at this time, including the rights of loyal minorities. With Germany's fortunes on the wane, the OUN-B distanced itself from fascist ideology. In September 1944, when German troops had already been driven out of Galicia, Bandera was set free. He did not return to his home region, but encouraged his followers there to continue their fight against Soviet rule. They did so against all odds, and despite a brutal campaign by the NKVD secret police and mass deportations of civilians. For them, the war

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<sup>9</sup> Rossolinski-Liebe, p. 251.

<sup>10</sup> Rossolinski-Liebe, p. 273ff.

went on. Roman Shukhevych, the commander-in-chief of the UPA, was tracked down only in March 1950 in a village near Lviv and killed himself. Others fought their ideological battle from Western exile. Bandera lived in Munich, where he was killed by a Soviet secret agent in 1959.

## The Bandera myth

With the end of the war and the murder of Bandera, the man turned finally into a myth – or into different myths, depending on where you stood. Those Galician nationalists and UPA fighters who had escaped the Soviet invasion – many of them to Canada – wrote a rich body of benevolent literature. It presented Bandera as a hero which fitted all requirements of the Cold War – a brave fighter against two totalitarianisms, whose followers were natural allies of the West.

In Soviet Ukraine, the nationalist project was repressed or vilified in its entirety. Hundreds of thousands of civilians from Western Ukraine were deported to forced labour camps. “Banderovets” became a label that could be attached to any real or purported enemy of Soviet power in Western Ukraine. It sounded as bad as “fascist”. There was no effort to recognise the UPA as an independent actor with its own agenda, and to distinguish it from outright collaborationism, i.e. the Ukrainian “Waffen-SS Division ‘Galizien’” which was under German command. There was also no effort to differentiate between different currents in and periods of OUN and UPA policy, and its more democratic rhetoric towards the end of the war. Even in the 1980s Ukrainian dissidents, no matter how democratic they were, could be labelled “Banderites” or “Fascists”.

With Perestroika, the Bandera cult which had survived in the Ukrainian diaspora came back to Galicia. In October 1990, the first Bandera monument was unveiled in his home village of Stary Uhryniv – a rare case of an anti-Soviet monument in the country of the Soviets. It was blown up twice, possibly by security forces. The third version – ironically recast from a Lenin statue – was unveiled in August 1992, when Ukraine was already independent. It stands to this day, and there are almost 40 Bandera monuments now in Ukraine.<sup>11</sup>

Lviv became a centre of the new Bandera fashion; there is a music festival called “Bandershtat”, and the local football club has adopted the red-and-black-colours of the UPA, in explicit defiance of a FIFA decision to ban right-wing symbols.

This resurgence of nationalist symbols (and with them Bandera) in Western Ukraine was hardly surprising – people there had been treated as “Banderites” by the Soviets, now they turned this into a positive label. But what was indeed surprising was his rehabilitation on the national level, given that most Ukrainians had ancestors who fought in the Red Army, not the UPA. In post-independence school textbooks, Bandera and UPA commander in chief Roman Shukhevych were treated as heroes of the fight for national independence, representatives of “the people” not only in Western Ukraine.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> In the administrative regions Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk, Ternopil, Rivne. Most of them stand in former Galicia, some in former Volhynia.

<sup>12</sup> Wilfried Jilge has analysed these schoolbooks in “Competing Victimhoods. Post-Soviet Ukrainian Narratives on World War II” in: *Shared History - Divided Memory. Jews and Others in Soviet Occupied Poland, 1939-1941*. Ed. by Elazar Barkan, Elizabeth Cole, Kai Struve. Leipzig 2008 (=Leipziger Beiträge zur jüdischen Geschichte und Kultur, 5), pp. 103-131.

There was a certain political logic behind Bandera's resurrection. Ukraine had won independence from Moscow almost unexpectedly; the new nation state was badly in need of its own history, a "true" national history that could be opposed to the discredited, "false" Soviet narrative. In this new history, all attempts at building a nation state had to be cherished. The proclamation of a Ukrainian state in Lviv in 1941 was indispensable in this narrative, as were similar attempts after World War I. Questions about the OUN's ideology, collaboration with the Germans, or atrocities came second.

Also, Bandera did not seem such a problematic figure any more, once you discarded Soviet historiography in its entirety as propaganda. Bandera had not built concentration camps like the Croatian dictator Ante Pavelic; instead, he had himself been prisoner in a German concentration camp and had lost two brothers in Auschwitz. The Nazi leadership's unwillingness to allow a OUN-led Ukrainian state may have been a defeat for Bandera in 1941, but it certainly helped his image after the war.

The pro-western "Orange Revolution" in 2004 only strengthened the anti-Soviet mood. It also brought a man into power whose main ambition lay in the field of the politics of memory. It was President Viktor Yushchenko who founded the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory and pushed for the construction of a memorial to the "Holodomor" victims – that is, to those Ukrainians who died in a famine in 1932-1933 due to Stalin's collectivisation. The Holodomor was officially proclaimed a Genocide directed at the Ukrainian people, and denying it was declared equally punishable as denying the Holocaust.

Stepan Bandera was also given new honours. He was placed on a stamp by the Ukrainian post for the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth in 2009. A year before, he had almost made it to the top rank in a talk show called "Great Ukrainians", where viewers were invited to vote by SMS. And in 2010, Yushchenko gave him posthumously the official (and very Soviet-sounding) title "Hero of Ukraine". This turned out to be a step too far for public opinion. It caused an uproar not only in Eastern Ukraine and Russia; it was condemned by the European Parliament as well. The title was withdrawn soon after Yushchenko had been succeeded by Yanukovich, whose supporter base was in the east of the country.<sup>13</sup>

The evolution of the Bandera myth in independent Ukraine turned out to be important when a new "revolution" brought down Yanukovich in 2014. The "Orange Revolution" a decade earlier had been peaceful and relatively free of nationalist symbols. This time, the mood was angrier and the readiness to resort to violence greater on all sides. The far-right "Freedom" party introduced nationalist slogans early into the protests. Football fans brought their own nationalist fan culture.

Neither "Freedom" party nor football hooligans nor "Right Sector" were ever the majority of the Maidan supporters. But there was hardly any resistance against their slogans either. UPA flags were tolerated, as was the Bandera portrait right next to the main stage of the Kiev protests. A decade ago, these symbols would have been considered too divisive to be shown. But in 2014, there was less control over the protests by moderate politicians, and a different understanding what a Bandera portrait meant. The positive myth of Bandera had gained ground, especially with a new generation of

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<sup>13</sup> Formally, the question was settled by a court decision: Since Bandera had never been a citizen of the Soviet Union, he could not be awarded the "Hero of Ukraine" medal, decided a district court in Donetsk.

young Ukrainians schooled after independence. It was now possible (and even common) to consider oneself a democratic politician and still integrate Bandera into one's pantheon.

This modernised Bandera myth worked, as historical myths always do, with emphasising some aspects of the historical evidence and leaving out others. The mythical Bandera was a fighter against two totalitarianisms, and his UPA a force that had defeated Nazism. His pre-war fight against the Polish government was de-emphasised. The UPA's massacres against Polish civilians could not be denied, but they were declared part of an unfortunate "Ukrainian-Polish war" which, after all, had claimed victims on both sides.<sup>14</sup> Other facts had to be left out completely: that the UPA was strong exclusively in Western Ukraine, that Bandera's supporters had killed both rival nationalists and Ukrainian civilians, and that OUN and UPA personnel were involved in the Holocaust.

The latter point was the most damaging one. It was countered by emphasising the fact that many Jewish doctors had nursed UPA fighters – an information I was told over and over again by young Ukrainian nationalists as proof of the alleged tolerance of the UPA. They did not know that most of these doctors had been liquidated when they were of no use to the UPA anymore, and that many had been forced to work for the partisans in the first place.<sup>15</sup> The positive myth of the UPA's Jewish doctors and nurses was even given a special exhibition in the Jewish museum in Dnepropetrovsk. The museum is part of the huge Jewish Culture and Business Centre "Menorah" built by the local oligarch Igor Kolomoisky – who, incidentally, became the leading financier of nationalist militias connected to the "Right Sector".

This was a sign of the times – the modernised Bandera myth went along with a modernised version of Ukrainian nationalism. Other than the "Freedom" party, the Right Sector professed a new nationalism that was radically non-ethnic, and distanced itself from antisemitism. Even their spokesman was Jewish. Russian nationalists coined the term "Zhidobandera" or "Kike banderite" for people like Kolomoisky. The term became immediately popular as an internet meme among Maidan-supporters, used to ridicule the Kremlin's accusation of the Maidan protesters as anti-Semitic fascists. "Zhidobandera"-T-Shirts are now even sold at Kiev souvenir stands. The accusation of being a "Banderite" had become so ubiquitous that it had lost any effect, and was turned into a joke.

But there are limits to reinterpreting the past and its symbols, especially in a society as divided as Ukraine. The greetings used on the Maidan were the best example. Already in December 2013, almost every speech ended with the slogan "Glory to Ukraine", followed by the crowd answering "Glory to the heroes".<sup>16</sup> This had been the compulsory greeting within the OUN-B, following the example of the formalised greetings in fascist Italy and Germany. I asked a prominent journalist and supporter of the Maidan, Vitali Portnikov, whether he was worried by this. He shrugged: "These slogans are being 'reformatted' by young people. They mean something different now". A liberal Kiev Jew, he did not take offence at these slogans. But I was wondering what people in Eastern Ukraine,

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<sup>14</sup> Volodymyr Viatrovych called his book on the subject „The Second Polish-Ukrainian War 1942-47“ (*Druha pol'sko-ukrains'ka viina. 1942-1947*, Kiev 2011).

<sup>15</sup> Rossolinski-Liebe, p. 275f.

<sup>16</sup> Ukrainian actor Evhen Nishchuk, who was called "The voice of the Maidan" because of his heavy presence on the scene, may be responsible for this. It was him who repeated the old OUN slogans so often they turned into a common greeting. This is the argument of Kiev-based political scientist Andreas Umland who warned early on against the use of ethno-nationalist symbols on the Maidan: „Patriot li Tyagnibok?“, *Levy bereg*, 31.12.2013. Nishchuk later became Minister of Culture.

even those sympathetic to the Maidan, would answer. Surely it was their right to hear the slogans in another way.

## Colorado beetles

In early February 2014, supporters of President Yanukovich gathered in Kharkov. The regional governor Mikhail Dobkin had made his city a stronghold of the Anti-Maidan, and he wanted to send a warning to the protesters in Kiev that his side would not give up power without fighting in the streets. A new organisation was founded, and the formation of armed militias announced. The leader of a prominent Mixed Martial Arts club was present. The organisation was called “Ukrainian Front”, like those Soviet troops who fought the Wehrmacht on Ukrainian territory. “Like their fathers and grandfathers in the 1940s, participants of the ‘Ukrainian Front’ will liberate their lands”, Dobkin announced.<sup>17</sup> The symbol of the Front was the St. George’s ribbon.

A month later, Yanukovich was ousted, and governor Dobkin’s Ukrainian Front disappeared. But the Saint George’s ribbon remained the badge of those who protested or took up arms against the new Kiev government in Crimea and the Donbass area. “Colorado beetles”, they were called by the other side because of the ribbon’s similarity to the insect’s colouring.

The St George’s ribbon was an obvious choice, even though it was a rather new symbol. It came from neighbouring Russia, where it had first appeared in 2005. Officially it was a non-government initiative, but in practice it was distributed by pro-Kremlin youth groups and promoted by state structures. Still, people did not see it as a political statement before the Ukrainian conflict. Many tied it to their car antennas and hand bags.

What made the ribbon appealing to Russians was the fact that it combined Soviet and Tsarist symbolism: it referred to the St. George’s order which had been established under Catherine the Great. After the October Revolution, it was used by white forces fighting the Red army in the civil war. Only after 1941 was the ribbon used again, mostly as a decoration for entire military units. Thus, memory of the victory could be detached from its Soviet context and placed in the wider context of the history of the Russian State.

This corresponded to the way the memory of the war had changed over the years. Since Brezhnev’s times, victory had been extensively celebrated in the Soviet Union. Post-Soviet Russia resumed this tradition in 1995. With the Soviet past discredited, victory was the one thing to remain proud of. Symbolically, the honour guard which used to guard Lenin’s tomb was moved in 1997 to the tomb of the Unknown Soldier around the corner.

Victory celebrations continued to intensify through the Putin years, as did unease that the rest of Europe did not see Russia the way it wanted to be seen. When the OSCE’s parliamentary assembly remembered the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Hitler-Stalin-Pact and passed a resolution equally condemning Stalinism and Nazism in 2009, Russian MPs stormed out of the assembly. The same year, President Dmitri Medvedev founded a “Commission for Fighting the Falsification of History to the Detriment of Russia’s Interests”. It was not that the Hitler-Stalin-Pact was forgotten in Putin’s Russia

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<sup>17</sup> Zerkalo nedeli, 1.02.2014. [zn.ua/UKRAINE/v-harkove-na-sezde-pervichnyh-organizacij-partii-regionov-sozdan-ukrainskiy-front-137950\\_.html](http://zn.ua/UKRAINE/v-harkove-na-sezde-pervichnyh-organizacij-partii-regionov-sozdan-ukrainskiy-front-137950_.html)

(Putin had once denounced it himself), but it was considered an event of purely tactical significance. And it had never become part of the war narrative: In best Soviet tradition, the “Great Patriotic War” was dated 1941-1945.

Finally, memory of the war changed with the conservative turn in Russian politics in 2012. The announcement that Putin would return to the Kremlin had sparked off mass protests of the liberal middle class in Moscow. Putin weathered this crisis by shifting his power base towards the patriarchal-minded, conservative parts of society. For the first time, his regime developed a semblance of ideology: Being Russian meant having “traditional” values which “the West” had given up, and these values were linked not only to the orthodox tradition, but to the victory in 1945 as the greatest in a long chain of Russian victories. A militant rhetoric of grandeur and uniqueness became fashion. During his election campaign in 2012, Putin called Russians “a victorious people. That’s in our genes”.<sup>18</sup> During a TV show in 2010, he said that Russia – as one of the Soviet Union’s republics – would have won the war against Nazi Germany even on its own, without Ukraine’s help – “because we are a country of victors”.<sup>19</sup> This statement caused anger in Ukraine, because it sounded like a belittling of Ukrainian’ contribution to victory. A Soviet victory had been turned into a Russian one.

It was of course not just Putin who changed rhetoric, but society. With less and less living veterans around, quiet family celebrations lost importance. A more extrovert and sometimes triumphalist way of celebrating appeared. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, people would write “Thanks Granddad for the Victory” on their car windows, or “Trophy from Berlin” on their German-made BMW.

It was rather a side effect that Stalin was practically (though not officially) rehabilitated – victory in the war washed away all his other sins, or even justified them. Celebrating victory meant celebrating a stronger, greater Russia that lay behind its present-day appearance; a lost empire which was symbolised by Stalin and the tsars alike. And the St George’s ribbon was a way of showing your attachment to this kind of Russia.

So with all talk of antifascism, the war myth was actually more about Russian strength and greatness, and could easily be combined with different political positions. Among the Russian fighters who pretended to fight against “Banderites” in Eastern Ukraine, there was even a Cossack “Wolves’ Hundred” – a Russian group which called itself after Cossacks who had fought alongside the Wehrmacht against Stalin’s troops. Clearly, it was not antifascism that had brought them to fight in Eastern Ukraine.

The most radical and colourful example of how the victory myth could be used to frame the Ukraine conflict was a “bike show” presented in August 2014 in Sevastopol. The military port in Crimea with a strong ethnic-Russian identity had been annexed by Russia four months earlier. The show was organised by the “Night Wolves”, a Moscow motorcycle club with close ties to the Kremlin, sponsored by the Russian Ministry of Culture and aired on Russian national TV. It culminated in a theatrical performance of the Maidan revolution and the following war. Fireworks cracked, basses boomed, artificial blood flowed abundantly, while the gigantic hands of the US and EU hung over the scene to direct Maidan demonstrators like puppets. They were forming a swastika.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> At his only campaign meeting in Moscow’s Luzhniki stadion on 23.02.2012. See: [er.ru/news/75844/](http://er.ru/news/75844/)

<sup>19</sup> At his yearly TV call-in show on 20.12.2010. See: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=26dcHyMASYs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=26dcHyMASYs)

<sup>20</sup> A complete video of channel Russia 2’s translation on [www.youtube.com/watch?v=HnJeokSi5io](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HnJeokSi5io).

From a platform high above the scene, Alexander “The Surgeon” Zaldostanov, head of the “Night Wolves” and a friend of Vladimir Putin, read a hymn to “fiery, holy, godly victory” in 1945. He recalled how Soviet battalions had struck “ten Stalinist blows into the shaggy body of fascism”, and how Stalin had “planted gardens” after the war, “and we thought they would blossom forever”. But then “enemies who hate us” had come: “They killed the Soviet land, took away its territory, its army, destroyed its big plants, cut our land in stripes and pieces. All the pieces of the one Russian state were bleeding and suffering intolerable pain... But now the healing is coming, coming from Russian Sevastopol... A new fight with fascism is inevitable. An eleventh Stalinist blow is inevitable”.<sup>21</sup> He ended with reading a greeting from Putin himself.

Clearly, the victory myth had changed beyond recognition: Stalin was mentioned in almost every sentence by a speaker with an orthodox cross on his leather jacket. The break-up of the Soviet Union was recast as the dismembering of a “Russian” state by its – presumably eternal – enemies. Time had come to fight them again and bring the amputated limbs together. This was a message of dominance and subjugation to Russia’s neighbours. There was no place in it for independent Ukraine.

## Toppling Lenin

Since the “Great Patriotic War” myth had been turned into a weapon against Kiev, it was understandable that the new powers there wanted to remove that weapon, and replace the myth with their own version. With Yanukovich’s fall, prominent Ukrainian nationalists were given positions where they could shape the politics of memory. The Ministry of Education was given to an admirer of OUN<sup>22</sup>, and the “Ukrainian Institute of National Memory” to Volodymyr Viatrovych – a young historian known for his apologetic books on OUN and UPA.

It was Viatrovych who proposed the red-and-black remembrance poppy as a “European” alternative to the orange-and-black St George’s ribbon. He also lobbied the decision to shift commemoration of the end of the Second World War ahead to 8<sup>th</sup> of May, as in Western Europe. The day was officially declared “Day of Grief”, whereas 9<sup>th</sup> of May was formally kept as Victory Day. The declared aim was to remember the war as tragedy, not as triumph. This was the way it was celebrated “all over the world”, said Viatrovych, and this way it had even been celebrated in the Soviet Union before a new victory cult had arisen under Brezhnev.

But the ambitions of Viatrovych and of the new politics of memory went much farther. In April 2015, the Ukrainian parliament voted for a set of four laws that codified the new view on history and had also been prepared by Viatrovych. They touched not only on the war, but on the entire period of Soviet Ukraine from 1917 until 1991. The most controversial one gave OUN and UPA members (among others) the privileged status of veteran “Fighters for Ukrainian Independence in the 20<sup>th</sup> century”. Paragraph 6 said: “Public denial of the legitimacy of the struggle for independence of Ukraine in the XX century is deemed an insult to the memory of the fighters for independence of Ukraine in the XX century, a humiliation of the Ukrainian people, and unlawful.”

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<sup>21</sup> Zaldostanov’s text was apparently written by Aleksandr Prokhanov, a Moscow writer and newspaper editor who combined mysticism, Stalinism and imperialism.

<sup>22</sup> Minister Sergey Kvit was previously president of the prestigious National University of Kiev-Mohyla Academy. Grzegorz Rossolinski-Liebe, Bandera’s critical biographer, was not allowed to hold a lecture there in 2012.

No legal consequences were mentioned, but restricting the freedom of expression was in itself worrying, and the rules were unclear. For example, the separatists in Eastern Ukraine were collectively denounced as “terrorists” by the Kiev government. But clearly the term “terrorist” could also be applied to the OUN’s activity in the 1930s, when it had murdered high-ranking Polish officials. Would it now be illegal to call that terrorism?<sup>23</sup>

Even further went the law “On condemning the Communist and National Socialist (Nazi) totalitarian regimes and prohibiting the propaganda of their symbols”. It outlawed any “public denial of the criminal nature of the communist totalitarian regime 1917-1991” and ordered the removal of any Soviet symbols, including not only statues, but even place names. If taken seriously, this meant the wholesale rebranding of much of Ukraine’s place names, if necessary against the will of local communities. Tens of thousands of streets, entire cities and even administrative regions like Dnepropetrovsk and Kirovograd would have to change names on Kiev’s orders. In the first version of the draft law, there was not even a provision exempting Soviet war medals. “Would a war veteran who got out on 9<sup>th</sup> of May with his Red Army flag fall under the law?”, Viatrovych was asked. Yes he would, was the answer.<sup>24</sup>

It tells a lot about the atmosphere in Kiev under the stress of Russian intervention, and also about the new balance of power in parliament, that such radical and controversial laws could be rushed through without discussion or resistance. It took just five minutes to adopt the law prohibiting communist and Nazi “propaganda”. The law on “independence fighters” – introduced by the son of former UPA leader Roman Shukhevych – was passed with a majority of 271 (of 450) votes. Even though the majority was not overwhelming, there was not a single vote against – most opponents stayed away from the session room. Far-right nationalist Andriy Parubiy, who presided the session, then led the Rada into a threefold celebratory exchange of the greeting “Glory to Ukraine – Glory to the heroes”.<sup>25</sup> Only half a year earlier – but already after Yanukovich’s fall – a similar law had failed to get the necessary votes even to be included into the agenda.

The law prohibiting Nazi and communist “propaganda” legalised ex-post facto a process that had started with the “Euromaidan”: the violent removal of Lenin statues across the country. On 8<sup>th</sup> December 2013, nationalist demonstrators had destroyed the Lenin statue opposite Kiev’s Bessarabski market. From that moment until June 2015, 729 Lenin statues across Ukraine were removed, a phenomenon which was jokingly called Leninopad (“Lenin fall”, as in “water fall” or “snow fall”).<sup>26</sup> It was the second wave of such attacks: In the early Nineties, most Lenin statues in Western Ukraine had been removed. This time it was the turn of Central and Eastern Ukrainian Lenin statues – apart from those in rebel areas, that is.

The ritual toppling of Lenin two decades after the fall of Leninism seemed absurd and undemocratic to many. But it did not seem outrageous. It is safe to say that one single attack on a Victory monument would have caused more upheaval both in Ukraine and in neighbouring Russia than one thousand attacks on Lenin statues. Russian politicians and media ridiculed the Anti-Lenin rampage, but they rarely scandalised it. Lenin statues were still present in almost all of Russia’s city centres –

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<sup>23</sup> Halya Coynash, *Politicizing History: Parliament adopts Dangerously Divisive Laws*, Kiev Post, 10.04.2015.

<sup>24</sup> Interview on 16.04.2015 with “Argument”: [argumentua.com/stati/vladimir-vyatrovich-nasha-zadacha-chtoby-sovok-ne-vozrodilsya-v-budushchikh-pokoleniyakh](http://argumentua.com/stati/vladimir-vyatrovich-nasha-zadacha-chtoby-sovok-ne-vozrodilsya-v-budushchikh-pokoleniyakh)

<sup>25</sup> Rada session Nr. 25 on 09.04.2015, transcript at [portal.rada.gov.ua/meeting/stenogr/show/5842.html](http://portal.rada.gov.ua/meeting/stenogr/show/5842.html)

<sup>26</sup> For the number of statues removed, see [leninstatues.ru/leninopad](http://leninstatues.ru/leninopad)



but not because Lenin was revered, but because his effigy carried no political message any more. To most citizens, Lenin statues had about as much political meaning as a tree or a traffic sign.

The same was true in Eastern and Southern Ukraine. There was little or no local support for toppling Lenin – this was done by radical nationalist groups – but there was not much resistance either. Exceptions were the toppling of the Lenin statue in Kharkov, which stood next to a Soviet modernist square listed as a Unesco World Heritage site, or when members of a nationalist volunteer battalion crashed their armed personnel carrier into a Lenin sculpture in the village of Meliorativnoye in Dnepropetrovsk region.

Removing Lenin's head did not make the average Eastern Ukrainian city look less Soviet. It was difficult enough to de-sovietise your past when you came from Galicia or Volhynia, which had not been part of the Soviet Union until 1939, and where the advent of communist rule had been seen as an invasion from the outside. In the rest of Ukraine, the Soviet system could hardly be construed as an occupation force. Ukrainians had both opposed and supported Soviet power, they had been both victims and perpetrators of Stalin's repressions and famine policy.

For the pro-Maidan forces, the conflict in Donbass was a war with the Soviet past, represented by a region which was even more thoroughly shaped by the Soviet system than any other region in Ukraine. The Donbass was a heavily industrialised area whose society had formed in the post-World War period, when the region was rebuilt. There was little left to see from earlier epochs, and it was convenient for the Maidan protesters to think of the Donbass as the Soviet antipode of European Ukraine.

But this was not how the pro-Russian fighters there wanted to see it. They mixed Stalinist symbols with orthodox and tsarist ones, and were not interested in defending Lenin. The most famous rebel warlord of spring 2014, Igor Strelkov, was actually a monarchist who liked to dress up in historical uniforms of the anti-Bolshevik Whites of the Russian Civil War epoch. Soon, pre-Soviet history came to play a great role in their rhetoric.

### 3. “New Russia” – or is there a Ukraine?

#### Birth of a new state?

On 25 of May 2014 the pro-Russian rebels in Eastern Ukraine announced the birth of a new state: “Novorossiia”, literally: “New Russia”. Until then, the rebel-held territories had been called “The People’s Republic of Donetsk” and “The People’s Republic of Lugansk”. That had sounded Soviet and relatively modest. “Novorossiia”, which was the name of a new Union of the two “republics”, sounded grand and ambitious. It was a tsarist expression that could be loosely applied to half of present-day Ukraine.

Pro-Russian activists from all over central and eastern Ukraine were invited to the event. It took place in a luxury hotel right next to Donetsk’s large football stadium and was the most bizarre political conference I had ever seen. Heavily armed men walked the corridors. A man in military fatigues with an unshaved face turned out to be the new “prime minister” of the Donetsk government, Aleksandr Boroday; he was in fact a public relations expert from Moscow who had never lived in Donetsk, but had proven his usefulness during the annexation of Crimea.<sup>27</sup>

The founding of “Novorossiia” took the conflict to a new level. The name made clear that Donetsk and Lugansk were just the starting point from where Russia’s control could expand all way through to the Romanian border. But first, the tsarist term “Novorossiia” had to be brought back to life. It was a dusty word which had fallen out of use several generations ago. “South East of Ukraine” was the established name for those territories the separatists claimed in the future as Novorossiia. The “South East” included nine regions, from Kharkov in the north to Odessa in the West and the Crimea in the South. These were the regions who had opposed pro-western forces in all elections from 2004 onwards.

The first time I heard the term “Novorossiia” in a political, not historical, context was on 12<sup>th</sup> February 2014 in Kharkov. Protests in the capital were escalating, despite new laws restricting the freedom of assembly. Kharkov governor Mikhail Dobkin had gathered a round-table of political experts to propagate and discuss his new Anti-Maidan organisation, called the “Ukrainian Front”. “Your front needs an ideological armour”, Dobkin was told by one of the guests, a journalist from Kiev called Alexander Chalenko. Chalenko suggested creating a “Novorossiia Assembly”, “Novorossiia League” or “Novorossiia Union”, since the term Novorossiia for Ukraine’s South-East was already used “in many intellectual circles”. Why, he asked Dobkin, don’t you invite governors and parliament speakers of all South-Eastern regions to Kharkov, form a “Novorossiia Union” and declare it an autonomous part of Ukraine?

Interestingly, this is almost exactly what happened – a congress was held on 22<sup>nd</sup> February, with high-ranking officials from Russia present. But just in the 10 days that had passed since the round table discussion, power in Kiev had already changed hands. President Yanukovich had fled the capital, and

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<sup>27</sup> Confusingly, there were two “Novorossiia” conferences within three days. On 22 May, DPR activist Pavel Gubarev had already founded a political movement of this name.

Dobkin was suddenly very careful what to say, or not to say. The word “Novorossiya” did not even appear.

But “Novorossiya” was clearly an idea whose time had come, as events escalated. Russia’s swift annexation of Crimea fuelled the hopes of Russian activists in Eastern Ukraine. If Crimea could become Russian, why not Donetsk or Lugansk? A measure of success of the “Novorossiya” idea was the use of the new flag associated with it – a red flag with a blue St-Andrew’s cross on it.<sup>28</sup> Its composition looked ingenious: It was inspired by the Russian Navy Jack – thus referring to Sevastopol and the glory of Russian arms – but at the time looked strikingly similar to the American Confederate flag, just without the stars.

For the new Kiev government, alarm bells rang when President Vladimir Putin of Russia suddenly picked up the expression “Novorossiya” while discussing the Ukrainian crisis. This happened in mid-April, at Putin’s yearly TV phone-in talk show. He said:

“The main issue is to secure the rights and interests of ethnic Russians and Russian-speakers in the South-East of Ukraine. Let me remind you, using the terminology of tsarist times, that this is Novorossiya: Kharkov, Lugansk, Donetsk, Kherson, Nikolaev, Odessa were not part of Ukraine back in tsarist times. All these territories were given to Ukraine in the 1920s by the Soviet government. Why? God only knows. This all happened after the victories of Potemkin and Catherine the Great in a series of well-known wars with their centre in Novorossiysk. That’s why the region is called Novorossiya. Later, these territories were lost for various reasons, but the people remained.”<sup>29</sup>

This did sound like a thinly veiled threat – only a month ago Putin had justified the annexation of Crimea with similar arguments of ethnic solidarity and historical justice. It also sounded wildly inaccurate as a history of these territories, as critics pointed out immediately.<sup>30</sup>

To start with, Kharkov – the region Putin mentioned first of all – had never been part of historical “Novorossiya”. It belonged to a historic region called “Sloboda-Ukraine”. Even supporters of the “Novorossiya” project admitted that they included Kharkov due to its industrial and political importance, not to historical stringency.

Neither was it true that “Novorossiya” was called after “Novorossiysk” (it was the other way round).

And what could one say of Putin’s claim that these lands “were never part of Ukraine back in tsarist times”? There simply was no administrative entity inside the tsarist empire called “Ukraine”. Tsarist Russia was a multi-ethnic state like the Soviet Union, but it was built on different premises. It was not divided into national republics.

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<sup>28</sup> The flag was popularised by DPR activist and “People’s Governor” Pavel Gubarev. On its origins see Alexey Eremenko, “Ukrainian Rebels channel U.S. confederates”, in *Moscow Times*, 10.04.2015

<sup>29</sup> [www.kremlin.ru/news/20796](http://www.kremlin.ru/news/20796) (translated from the Russian; the Kremlin’s English version differs from the original)

<sup>30</sup> See Andrey Illarionov (a former Putin adviser turned critic), *Istoriya Novorossii – „opiat’ dvoynka”*, published 29.04.2014: [aillarionov.livejournal.com/679717.html](http://aillarionov.livejournal.com/679717.html)

So was it all made up? And if not, what was the historical evidence on which one could try to build a “Novorossiya”?

### **Potemkin villages**

The term “Novorossiya” appeared in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, at a time when Russia expanded westwards faster than ever before or ever after. At the beginning of the century, the tsar’s empire had ended roughly at the Dnepr (which separates today’s Ukraine into two halves). At the end of the century, Russia included all of present-day Ukraine, with only few exceptions in the West (most notoriously Galicia, the future homeland of Stepan Bandera).

But this swift expansion happened in two very different ways. One part of the territories was acquired from the Polish Commonwealth – a large, but internally weakened Kingdom that fell prey to its neighbours Russia, Prussia and Austria and ceased to exist after the three Polish partitions. The other part of the territories was conquered from the Ottoman Empire and its vassals, the Crimean Tatar Khanate.

The territories differed greatly. The formerly Polish territories were already settled and forested. The territories wrested from the Turks and Crimean Tatars, on the other hand were free steppe, with fertile grounds which had never been ploughed. “New Russia” became the name of the steppe territory. It signalled that these were lands yet to be colonised. The name was both a claim and an invitation, similar to other colonies’ names like “New France” or “New England”. Subjects of the tsar were invited to settle, as were people from afar like German Mennonites, Balkan Slavs or Greeks.

The settlement of Novorossiya became a success story – even though Russia’s neighbours were sceptical at the beginning. When Catherine II toured the newly acquired territories in 1787, she and her travel companions (among them Emperor Joseph II) saw nicely decorated villages. Soon the rumour spread that Catherine’s favourite Grigory Potemkin had put up fake settlements, and that Catherine and Joseph had actually seen “Potemkin villages”.<sup>31</sup> In fact, the population of Novorossiya grew quickly, although only after Catherine’s times. The port city of Odessa, founded in 1794 and soon the capital of the General Governorate of Novorossiya, became Russia’s fourth biggest city in a period of only one hundred years.

It is easy to imagine the difference it makes for the identity of a region whether it had a long history of permanent settlement before it became part of the Russian Empire, or whether it was virgin steppe land that was colonised on the Tsar’s express orders. In an authoritative geographical description of the Russian Empire published in the years 1899-1914, the material devoted to present-day Ukraine was split up into two volumes: One called “Novorossiya and Crimea” and the other “Malorossiya” (“Little Russia”).<sup>32</sup> Little Russia was a word used interchangeably with Ukraine.

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<sup>31</sup> On this trip, and the rumour of the Potemkin villages, see Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Prince of Princes. The Life of Potemkin*, New York 2001, p. 380ff.

<sup>32</sup> Rossiya. Polnoe geograficheskoe opisanie nashego otechestva, Saint Petersburg 1899-1914, vol 7 (1903) and vol. 14 (1910). The latter was titled “Novorossiya and Crimea” and covered the governorates Bessarabia, Kherson, Tavriya, Ekaterinoslav and the Province of the Don Cossack Host.

Does that mean Putin was right in saying Novorossiia was “not part of Ukraine” after all? Ukrainian historians would object. This is because the story we have told so far about Russia’s expansion in the 18<sup>th</sup> century is complicated by the presence of the Cossacks. These were free men (often run-away serfs) who lived in more or less military communities in the steppe, mostly along big rivers like the Dnepr – that is, exactly where Polish-Lithuanian, Russian and Turkish-Crimean Tatar influences overlapped. And the term “Ukraine”, in its 18<sup>th</sup> century usage, designated the Cossack lands on both sides of the Dnepr. The Dnepr Cossacks were later considered the proto-Ukrainian nation by 19<sup>th</sup> century historians. Even today’s Ukrainian anthem – which was sung once every hour by Maidan protesters – still includes the vow to “prove that we are of Cossack kin”.

With the tsarist empire driving back the steppe nomads, some of the Cossack communities along the Dnepr became more of a nuisance than a help. Ironically, it was on Cossack lands where “Novorossiia” as a colonisation project started. The term was coined in 1764, when Catherine II founded a new governorate with its capital in Kremenchug, which was renamed Novorossiysk for this purpose. This was outside the separatist Novorossiia project of our days, in what is today considered central Ukraine.<sup>33</sup> Catherine went on to dissolve the Cossack community of the “Zaporozhe Host” and destroy their historical capital, which brought her the permanent hatred of Ukrainian nationalists.

On closer inspection, the history of “Novorossiia” is therefore more ambivalent. Like many other myths, the “Novorossiia” myth involves projecting modern concepts of nation and nation state back into a past in which these categories were fluid or not yet formed.

And even though one could argue with Putin that most of tsarist Novorossiia was not “Ukraine” according to the 18<sup>th</sup> century usage of the word, it soon became inhabited by Ukrainians. In the 1897 census of the Russian empire, the absolute majority of people in the Governorates Kharkov, Kherson and Ekaterinoslav (today’s Dnepropetrovsk) indicated Ukrainian as their mother tongue. The same was true for the mainland part of Tavriia Governorate (not counting Crimea with its strong Russian and Tatar communities).<sup>34</sup>

But the most threatening bit of Putin’s narrative was that the territories in question “were given to Ukraine” by the Bolsheviks for “unknown” reasons. There was a clear parallel here to his argumentation in the Crimea case in March 2014 – namely, that Khrushchev’s decision in 1954 to make Crimea a part of Soviet Ukraine was an illegitimate “gift” which violated historic justice and ethnic rights. In fact, no significant territories were handed over to Soviet Ukraine in the 1920s. When the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic was founded in 1919, it included already all the territories Putin had mentioned.

To give Putin credit, it was indeed unclear which boundaries Ukraine should have when the tsarist empire fell apart. There was a lot of confusion, and there was a civil war with many conflicting parties –there were the Reds, Whites and even Greens (anarchists), there were different groups of Ukrainian nationalists, there were the German Imperial army, western interventionists and the Polish army.

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<sup>33</sup> For the changing use (and eastward shift) of the term “Ukraine” in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, see Plokhyy (2006), 316ff.

<sup>34</sup> The 1897 census for today’s Ukrainian regions is analysed in “Etnicheskiy sostav ukrainskikh guberniy (po dannym perepisi naseleniya Rossiyskoy Imperii”, published on *Likbez*: [likbez.org.ua/census-of-the-russian-empire-in-1897-ukrainian-province.html](http://likbez.org.ua/census-of-the-russian-empire-in-1897-ukrainian-province.html)

But saying that the Bolsheviks “gave” something to Ukraine sounds as if there had been no Ukrainians among the Bolsheviks. And saying their reasons were “unknown” dismisses the rivalry of different projects of Ukrainian statehood. The Bolsheviks did not act in a vacuum. When the rival “Ukrainian National Republic” laid claim to Novorossiia, it made perfect sense for the Bolsheviks to include these territories into their competing project.

## A False Start

“After the October revolution 1917, the term ‘Novorossiia’ fell out of use”, stated the Great Soviet Encyclopedia in its 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. As if to prove the point, it devoted only short 21 lines to the entry on “Novorossiia”.<sup>35</sup>

Indeed, the historic term from tsarist times seemed almost forgotten – so much so that even the end of the Soviet Union did not bring it back to life. This was in spite of the fact that the new Ukrainian state had a very weak national identity, and many people found it difficult to understand what Ukraine’s independence actually meant to them. The fact that President Leonid Kuchma published a whole book under the title “Ukraine is not Russia” meant that this statement was not obvious to all.<sup>36</sup> Opinion polls showed that even two decades after the break-up of the Soviet Union, a majority of people both in Russia and in Ukraine did not consider the other state a foreign country.<sup>37</sup>

But when people expressed nostalgia for a lost common identity, it was for the Soviet Union. They did not need a tsarist term to express their proximity to Russia. And nostalgia was not restricted to former Novorossiia territories anyway.

However, there was a renaissance of the “Novorossiia” term in some Russian nationalist intellectual circles even before the term re-emerged in 2014. There was even a geopolitical “Theory of Novorossiia”, published in Moscow in 2000. Its author saw Novorossiia as a strategically important strip of Eurasia, stretching from the Danube all through to the Altay, and inhabited by a Russian “sub ethnos”, the Novorossiians. They were the pillars of the old Russian Empire: stout, independent and thoroughly anti-communist wheat-farmers. The actual people of Ukraine’s South-East, living in a thoroughly sovietised industrial society, would have been surprised to know.<sup>38</sup>

After the Orange Revolution and again after Ukraine’s bid for NATO membership, some “not entirely academic quarters in Moscow” played with the idea of a Moscow-friendly buffer state called “Novorossiia”, which would have the added advantage of solving the access to Transnistria, pro-Russian break-away territory of Moldova.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Bol’shaya Sovetskaya Entsiklopediya, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. Volume 18 (1974), lemma “Novorossiia”

<sup>36</sup> Leonid Kuchma, *Ukraina – ne Rossiya*, Moscow 2003.

<sup>37</sup> 58 percent of Ukrainians thought Russia was not a foreign country in a RBG poll in 2012. Even for people aged 18-29, the percentage was 52. (Ukrinform news agency, 28.02.2012, [www.ukrinform.ua/rus/news/-boleee\\_polovini\\_ukraintsev\\_ne\\_schitayut\\_rossiyu\\_zagranitsej\\_opros](http://www.ukrinform.ua/rus/news/-boleee_polovini_ukraintsev_ne_schitayut_rossiyu_zagranitsej_opros) . 61 percent of Russians thought the same about Ukraine in a Levada poll in 2013 ([www.levada.ru/12-11-2013/rossiyane-ob-ukraine](http://www.levada.ru/12-11-2013/rossiyane-ob-ukraine))

<sup>38</sup> E.F. Morozov, “Teoriya Novorossii”, in *Russkiy Geopoliticheskiy Sbornik* Nr.1, 1996. Online at [www.whiteworld.ru/rubriki/000102/001/00122008.htm](http://www.whiteworld.ru/rubriki/000102/001/00122008.htm)

<sup>39</sup> Dmitri Trenin, *Post-Imperium. A Eurasian Story*, Washington D.C. 2011, p. 100.

In 2013, Mikhail Pavliv – another exponent of the “Novorossiia” concept from Kiev – published an article called “Novorossiia’s Phantom Pain”, where he compared historical maps of Ukraine with election results after independence. It was a well-known fact that Ukraine’s electorate was roughly split in two halves, with the South-East opposing pro-western candidates or parties. Pavliv interpreted these voting patterns in historical terms. For him, the split in voting pattern indicated a cultural fault line running between the “macroregions” Western Ukraine and the Dnepr region (i.e. the ‘Ukraine’ of Early Modern times) on one side and “Novorossiia” on the other. The article appeared on the web platform of “Ukraine’s Choice”, a political movement against EU association and for joining a customs union with Moscow instead. Pavliv advocated a federalisation of Ukraine, with Novorossiia as one of the federal states.<sup>40</sup>

Still, the emergence of the Novorossiia project in 2014, with flags and an army of its own, came as a surprise to the public. It took a great effort by pro-Kremlin media to turn a half-forgotten historical term into a myth that might capture people’s imagination. The Soviet myth of victory in the Great Patriotic War had been easy to activate and use in the Ukraine crisis. Creating the Novorossiia myth was a taller order.

Russian state media adopted the term immediately after 26<sup>th</sup> June, when the separatists in Donetsk and Lugansk merged to form Novorossiia. These “Republics” “parliaments” had “ratified” a “union treaty” (it’s difficult to write this without quotation marks, given the dubious constitutional status) – and thus formed a “union state” called Novorossiia. A day later, the Russian state news agency Ria Novosti started publishing all its news about the Ukraine conflict under a new subject headline: “Ukraine and Novorossiia”.

A few days later, the director of the Russian Academy of Science’s Institute of Russian History announced at a meeting with Putin that his institute was already working to write a “History of Novorossiia”. Later in July, the Russian Historical Society (headed by parliament speaker Sergey Naryshkin) and a think tank connected to the Kremlin party “United Russia” convened a round table discussion on the “History and Culture of Novorossiia”. Its explicit aim was to bring a once-forgotten term back into people’s consciousness. “Many people have heard this term only recently”, said chairman Valeriy Fadeev at the introduction, and MP Vyacheslav Nikonov acknowledged that Novorossiia identity was “so far weak”. Still, Nikonov added, the name was “more viable” than the names of the Donetsk and Lugansk “People’s republics”.<sup>41</sup>

In late August, President Putin appealed “To the militia of Novorossiia”, asking them to open a corridor for encircled Ukrainian troops in Illovaysk. This was the closest Russia came to officially recognising the separatist structures. But Putin’s spokesman denied that there was any political meaning to the word “Novorossiia”. “This is what these territories are called”, he said, referring to history.<sup>42</sup>

In early September, President Putin again used the term “Novorossiia”, this time in an even more demonstrative way. He was filmed lighting candles in a Moscow church. They were “for those who

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<sup>40</sup> Mikhail Pavliv, *Fantomnye boli Novorossii*, published on the website of Ukrainski vybor, 23.07.2013 [vybor.ua/article/federalization/fantomnye-boli-novorossii.html](http://vybor.ua/article/federalization/fantomnye-boli-novorossii.html)

<sup>41</sup> Report of the Russian Historical Society, published 14.08.2014 on [rushistory.org/sobytiya/kruglyj-stol-istoriya-i-kultura-novorossii-v-tsaritsyno.html](http://rushistory.org/sobytiya/kruglyj-stol-istoriya-i-kultura-novorossii-v-tsaritsyno.html)

<sup>42</sup> Interview of Dmitry Peskov to Ekho Moskvyy radio station on 29.08.2014, [echo.msk.ru/programs/beseda/1389646-echo/](http://echo.msk.ru/programs/beseda/1389646-echo/)

defended people's lives in Novorossiia", he said into the camera. Supporters of open war against Kiev rejoiced: This video was "no accident, but a signal", said Moscow neo-imperialist Aleksandr Dugin; "Putin has chosen war."<sup>43</sup>

Of course, Putin had already chosen war – the Ukrainian troops at Illovaysk were encircled not only by "Novorossiia" militias, but by regular Russian troops as well who had stopped a Ukrainian offensive (even though the Kremlin denied any involvement). That was the point when the situation had reached a stalemate. On the one hand, the Ukrainians could not win militarily. On the other hand, the summer had shown that the South-East of Ukraine was far more loyal to Kiev than the proponents of the "Novorossiia" project had ever expected. Something was wrong with the idea that the South-East of Ukraine was "Novorossiia", a quasi-Russian region longing to be liberated by Moscow.

It turned out that the identity of the South-East of Ukraine was more complex than thought. Rejection of Galician-style Ukrainian nationalism did not mean rejection of Ukrainian statehood. It was one thing to vote differently from western and central Ukraine, but it was another to take up arms for a half-mythical entity of a bygone empire.

It also became clear that the South-East was divided in itself. Odessa for example had a unique city identity. Its inhabitants saw themselves primarily as Odessites, and only then as Russians or Ukrainians. Dnepropetrovsk was a similar case. There was little these regions had in common with the Donbass. Novorossiia, it turned out, was the name of a territory, not of an identity. Or, in other words: If there was a "New Russia", it was one without "New Russians" living in it.

It took some time to acknowledge this fact. "There is no Novorossiia. We all use this word, of course, but honestly, it was a false start. It's an idea, a dream", said Alexander Boroday, the ex-prime minister of the Donetsk People's Republic, in January 2015. He acknowledged that resistance to Kiev was simply not strong enough outside the Donbass.<sup>44</sup>

In Mai 2015, the "Union State Novorossiia" which Boroday and others had subscribed to a year ago was officially declared "temporarily stopped".<sup>45</sup>

## **Mixed Messages from the Russian World**

There were other reasons why the Novorossiia project failed. The Novorossiia myth was supposed to offer a common historical identity to all regions of Ukraine unaffected by the Maidan revolution. But this identity offer was competing with other identity offers – not only Ukrainian ones, but Russian ones. There were mixed messages coming from Moscow, and they were mutually incompatible.

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<sup>43</sup> Aleksandr Dugin, "Sliva 'Novorossii' ne budet. Putin okonchatelno reshil 'zachistit' Kremli' ot prozapadnyx liberalov", published on *Russkaya Vesna*, 20.09.2014. [rusvesna.su/recent\\_opinions/1411232145](http://rusvesna.su/recent_opinions/1411232145)

<sup>44</sup> Interview with online TV channel "Den" on 12. January 2015. See: [www.dentv.ru/content/view/igor-bezler-aleksandr-borodaj-mira-bez-pobedyi-ne-budet/](http://www.dentv.ru/content/view/igor-bezler-aleksandr-borodaj-mira-bez-pobedyi-ne-budet/) (at 29m20s)

<sup>45</sup> Interview of the DPR's "Minister of Foreign Affairs" to Vechernyaya Makeevka, 14.05.2014. [vecherka.in.ua/?p=3326](http://vecherka.in.ua/?p=3326), later confirmed by Oleg Tsarev, head of the "Union parliament".



A striking example were the arguments advanced for the annexation of Crimea. Vladimir Putin announced it in March, in a speech in the Kremlin that was probably the most emotional he had delivered so far.<sup>46</sup> He put forward a wide range of arguments – from ethnicity (of the 2.2m inhabitants of Crimea, 1.5m were Russians and only 350,000 Ukrainians, he said) to language, and even to Soviet constitutional law (when Crimea was handed over to the Ukrainian Soviet Republic in 1954, this was done “in violation of constitutional norms”).

But central to his speech were the results of a (controversial) referendum held in Crimea. Crimeans wanted to be with Russia, he said, “and to understand this decision, it’s enough to know the history of Crimea; to know what Russia meant and means for Crimea, and what Crimea means for Russia”. It was here, he went on, that Prince Vladimir the Great had converted to Orthodox Christianity, laying “the civilizational foundation which unites the peoples of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus”. It was also here that Russian soldiers had fought and died, first to make Crimea part of a powerful Russian State, then to defend it.

Some of his arguments went far beyond Crimea, though. The Russians were “perhaps the biggest partitioned nation in the world”, he said, since so many ethnic Russians lived outside Russia’s borders. He then drew a parallel to the reunification of Germany and added that he expected Germans “to support the aspirations of the Russian World, of Historic Russia towards reunification.”

On a conciliatory note (or what Putin thought would sound conciliatory), he said that the conflict in Ukraine was painful to see, “since we are not just close neighbours, but in fact, as I have often said, one people (‘odin narod’). Kiev is the mother of Russian cities. Ancient Rus’ is our common source, we can’t do without each other.”

His was a confusing mix of historical arguments. If Russians and Ukrainians were in fact one people, why look at the ethnic balance of Russians and Ukrainians in Crimea? And why did the baptism of Vladimir the Great – a medieval prince who ruled in Kiev before Moscow even existed - link Crimea more to Russia than to Ukraine? Strikingly, the term “Novorossiia” was also absent in the speech, even though Crimea was historically a part of Novorossiia. This was not an accidental omission: when Putin did use the term “Novorossiia” a month later in his TV talk show, he also dropped Crimea from his list of Novorossiia regions.

The last point was easy to understand: the Kremlin had decided that Crimea would be immediately incorporated into Russia, whereas the future status of “Novorossiia” was undecided. Associating Crimea with Novorossiia would only weaken the case that Crimea had to be Russian. With the priorities clearly set, the two discourses had to be carefully separated.

The rest of the speech was a jumble of concepts which competed with, or contradicted, the Novorossiia project. The “Russian World” Putin alluded to was a popular but vague term originating in the sphere of culture and philosophy. It meant that Russia, as other former empires like Britain or Spain, had a sphere of cultural influence which deserved support. In 2007, President Putin established a “Russian World” foundation which was to popularise Russian language and culture abroad.

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<sup>46</sup> Address in the Kremlin on the issue of Crimea, 18<sup>th</sup> march 2014, [kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/20603](http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/20603)

However, the term acquired a religious meaning as well. The adjective “Russkiy” – as opposed to “Rossiyski” – could refer not only to Russia, but to medieval Rus. The Moscow Patriarch used “Russkiy Mir” in this sense for the lands of Russian Orthodoxy, which included Ukraine, Belarus and Moldavia. In this sacralised version the Russian World could also stand for the idea of a distinct civilisation which was fundamentally different from the West. This did not mean that borders had to be changed and nation states abolished, said Patriarch Kirill in a 2009 address. The Russian World was a supranational project, which he compared to the British Commonwealth or the Francophonie.<sup>47</sup>

That Putin took such a vague cultural concept and turned it into an argument for military action came as a surprise. The president was a “guarantor of the security of the Russian World”, as Putin’s spokesman put it.<sup>48</sup>

In its civilizational or religious version, the Russian World was a concept that included much more of Ukraine than just Crimea or even Novorossiia – potentially all of it except Galicia, which had never been part of the tsarist empire and where the majority faith was Greek Catholicism. Certainly the Patriarch’s version of “Russian World” did not make sense without Kiev, the cradle of Eastern Slav Orthodoxy.

Putin’s assertion that Russians and Ukrainians were in fact “one nation” went even farther than the “Russian World” concept. Denying Ukrainian nationhood had a long tradition. In Tsarist Russia, which traced its history back to Kiev, Ukrainians or “Little Russians” were considered a sub ethnos of the Russian Nation. They were industrious and merry peasants (so went the stereotype), speaking a funny corrupted version of Russian and living in a milder climate, but they were Russians all the same. Like Belarussians, they were the younger brothers of the Great Russians, an indispensable part of a “triune” Russian nation.

The Bolsheviks did officially recognise the fact that there was a separate Ukrainian nation – but only within the strict limits of the Soviet system. In practice, this system fostered a homogeneous, Soviet Russian culture. Ukrainians could reach the highest party offices in Moscow (unlike, say, Uzbeks or Chechens), as long as they spoke Russian and did not parade their Ukrainian identity.

So it came as a surprise when Ukraine’s communist party elite teamed up with dissident nationalists, declared a referendum in 1991 and let voters choose independence. Unexpectedly, Ukrainian nationhood turned from a theoretical concept into something tangible. With Ukraine gone, the Soviet Union made no sense any more.<sup>49</sup>

Not only Putin, but even prominent protagonists of the Novorossiia project sent mixed messages about what they really wanted. Igor Strelkov, the most prominent military leader of the pro-Russian fighters in 2014 and object of a personality cult, was in fact a classical monarchist who wanted to resurrect an Orthodox Russian empire. The Manifesto of his “Novorossiia Movement” explicitly

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<sup>47</sup> Address at the opening of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Assembly of the Russian World in Moscow on 03.09.2015, [www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/928446.html](http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/928446.html)

<sup>48</sup> Peskov to Itar-Tass news agency, 7.3.2014, [tass.ru/politika/1029517](http://tass.ru/politika/1029517)

<sup>49</sup> On the decisive role Ukraine played in the break-up of the Soviet Union 1991, see Serhii Plochy, *The Last Empire. The Final Days of the Soviet Union*, New York 2014.

referred to the “triune Russian nation”, thus declaring the Ukrainians again to be younger brothers of the Great Russians.<sup>50</sup>

The writer and newspaper editor Alexander Prokhanov – a prominent Novorossiia supporter in Moscow who boasted that “the whole military elite of Novorossiia are authors of my newspapers ‘Den’ and ‘Zavtra’”<sup>51</sup> – also wanted more than Novorossiia. He wanted the empire back, just in “Red” instead of “White” form. To him, the Soviet Union was of messianic and mystical importance.

Pavel Gubarev, a leading Novorossiia activist in Donetsk and former “people’s governor”, was more explicit in defining the borders of Novorossiia. But even his version was expandable. His “minimum goal” was the eight regions of Ukraine’s South-East, but if things went well, there was a “Greater Novorossiia plus” (sic) version which would include three regions of central Ukraine and Kiev.<sup>52</sup>

All three of them frequently used the vague “Russian World” slogan, which implicitly included a claim to Kiev.

So there was the paradoxical situation that both the people the Novorossiia rhetoric was addressed to, and the people who were using it, did not subscribe to the idea behind it. Those who lived in the South-East of Ukraine did not identify with being “Novorossiians”; those who fought for “Novorossiia” did not accept the limits of the concept.

Was Novorossiia a historical myth that failed? In terms of its reception by people in Ukraine, it was. It did not capture their imagination and looked artificial. It could not compete with the strong emotional appeal of the St George’s ribbon and the myth of the “Banderites”, that is of an antifascist fight in the tradition of the “Great Patriotic War”.

It could not compete with the appeal of the more narrow Donbass identity either – as an industrial region where people saw themselves as hard workers, simple and honest. The Novorossiia aesthetics with its imperial and Russian-orthodox symbolism seemed a strange import here. Crossed hammers - the sign on the first seal of the “Donetsk People’s Republic” – suited the DPR project better than the double-headed Russian eagle which replaced them.

But the Novorossiia myth was a success in another sense. It allowed radical Russian nationalists and neo-imperialists to form a broad coalition with more moderate parts of the Moscow political establishment. There was something for everybody in this concept and its historical imagery. There was an appeal to Russia’s imperial greatness, by imagining Novorossiia as a frontier territory whose colonisation was a collective endeavour of the Russian Empire and its peoples. For monarchists, it was a stronghold of the White movement in the Civil War. Eurasianists could marvel at its geography, as part of the great Eurasian steppe.

That Novorossiia had no clear boundaries was an advantage, too. The term just meant that a big chunk of Ukraine was “not theirs, but ours”, without forcing one to go into the details.

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<sup>50</sup> *Manifest of the “Novorossiia” Movement of Igor Strelkov*, 24.1.2015, [novorossia.pro/news/novosti-odnovorossia/393-manifest-obschestvennogo-dvizheniya-novorossiya-igorya-strelkova.html](http://novorossia.pro/news/novosti-odnovorossia/393-manifest-obschestvennogo-dvizheniya-novorossiya-igorya-strelkova.html)

<sup>51</sup> Interview to *Sobesednik*, 1.7.2014, [sobesednik.ru/politika/20140701-aleksandr-prohanov-vklyuchat-novorossiyu-v-sostav-rossii-esh](http://sobesednik.ru/politika/20140701-aleksandr-prohanov-vklyuchat-novorossiyu-v-sostav-rossii-esh)

<sup>52</sup> E.g. his 2014 article in Prokhanov’s newspaper. Ekaterina Glushik, Pavel Gubarev, “Novorossiia ili Smert’”, *Zavtra* No. 37 (1086), 11.09.2014, [zavtra.ru/content/view/novorossiya-ili-smert/](http://zavtra.ru/content/view/novorossiya-ili-smert/)

With this fuzziness, the Novorossiia concept helped blur the lines between two conflicting attitudes towards Ukraine – between one that disputed Ukraine’s nationhood altogether, and one that accepted the Ukrainian nation state but disputed its present borders. It combined a tsarist-imperialist sound with a logic that was actually irredentist rather than imperialist; that is, aimed at redeeming “lost” territories for a nation state rather than rebuilding a formal Empire. This ambiguity was typical for a political culture where imperial, Soviet and nationalist symbols could be easily combined, where Communists revere Nicolas II and where Stalin can appear on icons. Historian Andrey Zorin has compared the imperial and Soviet rhetoric in Russia to the way Mussolini’s Italy used Ancient Roman symbols, even though the country had little in common with the Roman Empire. The Novorossiia project was just “a shining example of historical post-modernism”, of the opinion “that there is no real history, and that all history is a political construction connected to somebody’s interests.”<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Interview to Insider, 13.11.2014, [theins.ru/history/2015](http://theins.ru/history/2015)

## 4. Conclusion

As I am finishing this paper, fighting in Eastern Ukraine has again died down. But the conflict is far from over. The fate of the Donbass is undecided, as is the future of Russian-Ukrainian relations.

How significant were historical myths to the escalation of violence? Was history just a cover to mask other motives? And if all sides claimed they were defending historical identities – did they even believe in their claims? Where’s the border between a historical “myth” and a sheer propaganda lie? We cannot answer all of these questions, but some of them.

The Maidan revolution was driven by anger at a corrupt and authoritarian president, but it also turned into an expression of a new national identity. It was a step in building a Ukrainian political nation. In such a process, historical narratives and myths do matter. Nations are “imagined communities” (in the words of Benedict Anderson), and these communities need stories they can share about where they come from, and why they differ from other communities. Inevitably, these stories are met with competing narratives and myths. This was the case in Ukraine as well.

Large segments of Ukrainian society, especially the elderly and especially in the South-East, were not ready to take part in this exercise of building a modern Ukrainian nation. This was not because they felt Russian. They simply would not define their identity in national terms, and refuse the either-or-choice that they were offered. An internal political conflict was therefore inevitable. However, this conflict would most probably not have turned violent had it not been for Russian military intervention – with the consequence that in the end, the identity choice was forced upon even the most reluctant Ukrainian citizens.

The myth spread by pro-Russian rebels and Russian TV of a neo-Nazi coup in Kiev, a “Banderite junta” worthy to be fought in a sort of Great Patriotic War 2.0, was aimed at delegitimising the new government and at legitimising violence against it. The accusations were not new. Similar accusations of fascism and “Banderites” had been used a decade earlier against the leaders of the Orange Revolution.

But this time the myth was used with more success. This was not just because Kremlin-controlled television lied about what was going on in Kiev. It was also because the protesters in Kiev and the new government had indeed used, or tolerated, divisive symbols like the portrait of Bandera right next to the main stage on Maidan, or the OUN greeting “Glory to Ukraine – Glory to the heroes!” That had not happened at the Orange Revolution, where rhetoric had been more inclusive. The Orange Revolution had after all been a typical “colour revolution”, strictly focussed on voters’ rights.

Little did it matter that most protesters on Kiev’s “Euromaidan” did not think a Bandera portrait or an OUN greeting would compromise their pro-EU and pro-democracy message. They had split the historic Bandera into two halves, the independence fighter and the far-right extremist, and integrated only the useful half into their world view.<sup>54</sup> To them, Bandera’s alleged fascism was just a negative Soviet historic myth which their post-independence school books had long denounced.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> For an explicit justification to do so, see Mykola Riabchuk’s 2010 essay “Dovkola Bandery”

<sup>55</sup> Calling Bandera a fascist in public could actually get you into trouble in Kiev. When German historian and Bandera’s biographer Grzegorz Rossolinski-Liebe tried to present his work in Kiev in 2012, all the planned venues were closed to him, and he was forced to speak inside the German Embassy.

So the interplay of myths old and new did matter in the escalation. They shaped the mutual perception of what was going on.

While the myth of an antifascist war against “Banderites” was powerful, the myth of “Novorossiya”, of a distinct identity of South-East Ukraine based on tsarist colonisation and the deeds of Prince Potemkin, failed to capture the imagination. It was good for rallying different imperialist and nationalist forces in Moscow, but it did not offer a credible historical identity. Novorossiya was, so to speak, itself a Potemkin village – easy to erect, impossible to live in. But even though the facades stood only for a short while and were hastily removed when no longer needed, they left traces.

From the Kremlin’s side, the partition of Ukraine was suggested rather on a trial basis, to blackmail Kiev into a new constitutional arrangement and keep all of Ukraine from drifting westward. None the less the Novorossiya plan expanded the limits of what could be publicly expressed. Together with the annexation of Crimea, it put into question the whole make-up of post-Soviet space. That broke a taboo. More than two decades had passed since a grand scheme like this had been seriously discussed. That was in 1990 when Alexander Solzhenitsyn had tried to define the geographical border between what was Russia proper and what was the Soviet Union, or between Nation and Empire. According to him all former Soviet republics could and should be dismissed into independence, but Ukraine and Belarus and Northern Kazakhstan should stay with the Russian Soviet Republic to form a “Russian Union”.<sup>56</sup> Now, the time for grand schemes seemed to be back, no matter that the motivation was different this time.

What looked to many Western observers like an attempt to resurrect the Soviet empire may instead be that empire’s final disintegration. With the swift formal annexation of Crimea, Russia’s leadership had already clearly opted for extending Russia as a nation state, and against rebuilding an empire. The Novorossiya myth worked in the same direction. With his claim that one-half of Ukraine was not really Ukrainian, Putin angered the Centre-West of Ukraine, failed to convince the South-East, and contradicted himself. Russians and Ukrainians were, after all, not “one people”.

That was where the Novorossiya myth differed from the myth of an antifascist fight. The latter did not require people to decide which nation they wanted to belong to – antifascists can come in all colours. It offered an “imagined community” which was larger than a nation. Novorossiya instead required a decision.

The Kremlin thus unintentionally helped the nation-building in Ukraine, and at home as well. It seems that we are witnessing Russia’s final transformation from an empire to a nation state; an assertive nation state, one aspiring to dominance over its neighbours, but still one with a different mentality and identity. A nation state for which Kiev is finally not just the capital of a neighbouring, but of a foreign state.

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<sup>56</sup> Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *Kak nam obustroit’ Rossiyu. Posil’nye Soobrazhenia*. (English: *Rebuilding Russia*). The text had a huge readership. It was published at the time of Solzhenitsyn’s triumphal return to Russia on 18<sup>th</sup> September 1990 as a special supplement in *Komsomolskaya Pravda* newspaper (circulation of 27 million) and *Literaturnaya Gazeta*. It explicitly mentioned the term Novorossiya, though without a suggestion of separating it from the rest of Ukraine.

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