

World War II and Auschwitz in Ukrainian memory politic

It is hardly to tell for all the country and my speech could have some regional specific, but if it is so, it was not made purposely.

I want to begin my speech from something sudden and not connecting with World War II and Auschwitz – from Taras Bulba, a hero of Mykola Hohol novel. I want to begin from him through one simple reason – he is fictional person, not historical man, but a lot of people in Ukraine believe that he was real. These people are very far from historical science, but it happens so, that main part of people is also far from historical science. They don't listen for historians; they don't read historical books or watching historical TV programs. But they read some fiction books, playing games and watching films at the cinema and so on. I want to talk about this to pay attention on the fact that historical memory is shaping not only by historians (sometimes I feel some analytics wants to exaggerate the role of historians and historical institutions in the process of shaping of historical memory), but it is also shaping by filmmakers, writers, artists, journalists and many other people. It happens so, that a lot of these materials are creating in other countries. It is a result of globalization. And we have such situation in Ukraine also.

A lot of young Ukrainians discover for themselves World War II and Auschwitz from Marvels films. Marvel hero Magneto was a prisoner in Auschwitz when he was a child. The story of the film "Capitan America: the first avenger" also took part during World War II. Such films as "Dunkirk", "The imitation game" and many other were also very popular in Ukraine. And I think that it is good, course from these films young people can understand the role of Western front and terrible of the war. We need this course we have also films and games not only from West, but also from the East. Russian propaganda machine use theme of World War II very often. Keynote of this propaganda consists from some theses: it was the greatest Russian victory. We have this victory only by Russians service (for instance – Ukrainians must be only traitors). The war isn't something terrible – it is interesting to fight. We know such modern Russian proverb about World War II: "We can repeat!". This propaganda was born only in 1970, but still alive. There was a lot of such Russian pop production in Ukraine before 2013: films and serials such "SMERSH", "Star" and many other. A lot of books, also – fantasy books where hero comes to the past with modern weapons and kills Nazi. From the beginning of Ukrainian-Russian war main part of this production is forbidden in Ukraine for the hate speech and glorification of Soviet army, but it is still available in the Internet. A lot of Ukrainian people accustomed to this propaganda from the Soviet times and they want to hear it and nothing else.

So among the tasks for Ukrainian historians (I mean mainly Ukrainian Institute of National Memory) are not only to discover historical facts, but also to change remembering of World War II. First of all – to reach an understanding among the people that World War II mustn't associate with a victory and glory of army, but must associate with a great tragedy and honor of victims. For this reason from 2016 the main day of remembering of World War II in Ukraine is 8 of May – the Day of Memory and reconciliation. Not 9 of May – the Day of Victory in the World War II as it was in USSR and modern Russia. We also don't using in Ukraine other symbols of Victory in WWII which were used in USSR and modern Russia – we have taboo for using Soviet flag and emblem by the Decomunisation law from 2015 year (by this law we have a ban for using and demonstrating symbols of totalitarian and cruel regimes – Nazi and Soviet). From 2017 we have a law about indirect of St. George Ribbon that was used as one of the main symbols of Victory in WWII in USSR and modern Russia. This indirect was connected with using this symbol by Russian terrorists on the East of Ukraine against Ukraine (it was one of the elements of demonization of Ukrainians – using this symbol as an opposition to say that Ukrainians are Nazi).

We have some problems with understanding of these changes by the part of Ukrainian society (especially on the East). Some people, as they told me, want to have a celebration of Victory, course it is good emotion and don't want to fill depression after remembering of victims of the war as Ukrainian power and Ukrainian Institute of National Memory recommend. Pro-Russian opposite in Ukraine organize popular in Russia from 2012 Movement "Immortal regiment" – the procession with photos of Soviet veterans of WWII (this action is not indirect in Ukraine, but has not official character). Ukrainian power doesn't support this action through its political aspect – demonstration allegiance to Russia. But some nongovernment organizations last year organized "monstration" (demonstration with fake and comedy slogans) in Ukraine. They organized processions look like "Immortal regiment", but with photos of heroes from Marvel films, "Lord of the rings" and other blockbusters. The main task was to show that organizers of the "Immortal regiment" don't use photos of their relatives, as they told, but use photos of soldiers from Internet. So it is not homage of them, course they even don't know names of these people and throw out these photos to trash bins after actions. But this "monstration" didn't find good understanding in Ukrainian society, as I think, course a lot of people perceived it as mockery of memory about soldiers.

I want to notice, that by the Decommunisations laws, there were not destroyed monuments and renamed street created and named by the people took part at the World War II on the Soviet side. These monuments still exist. We also have some good examples of rethinking on the practice some monuments. For instance – Diorama of forcing the Dnipro river in the Dnipropetrovsk national historical museum. It is a great panel, but it's main idea – demonstration of Soviet army brave and showing them as a heroes. But there were a lot of details disagree with historical facts, beginning from the tanks which took part in the battle on soviet side and continuing mixing of the events from different time and even absurd fact that when Soviet soldiers came out from the water, their clothes were not wet on the picture. And at last – there were no one man on the picture in civil clothes, so called "chornorubashetchniki" (black shirts). Soviet propaganda didn't want to tell about them, but it was good known fact, that when Soviet army came on the occupied territory such as Ukraine, it was often used local civilians (often – children) to bring them before themselves to the battles. Army didn't give them uniform or weapons. The same was in the Dnipro city. And it was necessary to tell about this during renovation of Diorama. But there was a problem, course historians had an agreement do not change Diorama painting and to save it as a sample of a Soviet propaganda about World War II. So, it was made a decision to create a film, in which is talking about true story of the battle with reconstructions and interviews of participants and witnesses (museum still collects interviews with people who remember World War II in the region). It was created a big screen which closes all the Diorama painting and before looking on the painting visitors must to see the film. Then screen takes away from the painting.

So, for today Ukrainian memory politic about WWII is mainly directed on the reaction on Russian propaganda and myth about this war. One example – Russian president Vladimir Putin told in 2010 year that Russia could win the WWII without Ukraine. These words find very negative reaction in Ukrainian society. Putin told this course it is necessary for modern Russian propaganda to associate Ukrainians only with Nazi allies, but not with the Soviet army. They need it to create from modern Ukrainians enemy image in Russia. And one of the tasks of Ukrainian historians for today is to demonstrate the role of Ukrainians in the Soviet army, to demonstrate that among Ukrainians were a lot of victims but not only aggressors.

After this introduction let's talk about memorizing of Auschwitz in Ukraine.

People in Ukraine knew about Auschwitz museum even before official movement in this way by Ukrainian authorities. A lot of them heard about Auschwitz from their friends in Israel and Poland and different tourists who went here. For today a lot of them can visit museum themselves.

Official Ukrainian authorities began interesting by Auschwitz thematic from 2005 after president Yushenko visit to the museum. It was formed an idea to organize Ukrainian national museum exhibition in Auschwitz. But long and difficult research work must take precedence of such exhibition creation. There were made a few steps in this field in Ukraine. First of all it was created an exhibition "Concentration camp Auschwitz – Ukrainian survey" by Memorial complex "National Museum of the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945" (modern Museum of Ukraine in World War II) in 2008. Then, after visit to Auschwitz president Poroshenko the idea of creation Ukrainian exhibition in Auschwitz was revived. Exhibition "Concentration camp Auschwitz – Ukrainian survey. Researches, documents, testimonies" was restarted in 2015. Then it was open street exhibition in Kyiv "Human triumph: the inhabitants of Ukraine who passed the Nazi concentration camps" by Ukrainian institute of National memory in 2018. This year this exhibition must visit all regional centers in the country.

It is interesting what themes are illuminated due Auschwitz in Ukrainian public space and these exhibitions also. First of all it is ukrainian soldiers participation as the part of Soviet Army during liberation of Auschwitz. It is a real fact good illustrated by ukrainian soviet photographer Volodymyr Yudin (his unique photos of this event preserved at "Central State Film and Photographic Archive of Ukraine named by Pshenychnyi". One of the reasons to demonstrate these facts was making an answer to Putin's words, that Russia could won in this war without ukrainians. There were a lot of interesting publications on these theme in Ukraine – an article by Serhii Gromenko "Auschwitz's release: Ukrainian account" in "Historical truth" this year, where he demonstrate biographies of main ukrainian figures, who took part in this event. Publications of photographs by Volodymyr Yudin, publications with statistic number of ukrainian soldiers who took part in this operation (nearly 38 000) and other parts of Soviet Army. But historians, who works with the idea of Ukrainian national exhibition in Auschwitz noticed in interviewed that this theme (liberation of Auschwitz by ukrainians) mustn't be a central in such exhibition, as it is in Russian exhibition, course question of Ukraine and Auschwitz is more difficult.

One of the themes connected with Auschwitz and Ukraine is ukrainian artist Zynovii Tolkachov, who visited Auschwitz in 1945 with Soviet Army and made a serie of paintings. His album "Osvenzim" was published in Kyiv in 1965, but even today we can find publications about him. Nowadays there were few exhibitions of his paintings from collection of Museum of Ukraine in World War II – in 2017 dedicated to International Holocaust Remembrance Day and in 2019 dedicated to the International Day for the Release of Prisoners of Nazi Concentration Camps.

Another theme of Ukrainians widespread illuminated in ukrainian media is ukrainian nationalists (members of Organisation of ukrainian nationalists) – prisoners of Auschwitz. A lot of them arrested after attempts to proclaim restoration of independence of Ukraine 30 of June 1941. Among them there were brothers of famous ukrainian nationalist – Stepan Bandera – Vasyl and Oleksii Bandera. Both of them died in Auschwitz. Totally there we near 250 members of Organisation of ukrainian nationalists – prisoners of Auschwitz. One of the reasons to talk about them was to demonstrate that Ukrainian nationalists were not only allies of Nazi, there were people disagree with regime. That's why this them so likes nationalistic web-sites. But there were two another reasons to write about this fact – it is hardly to identify Ukrainians among Auschwitz victims – most of them were written as Poland's or Russians, but it was easily to identify nationalists as Ukrainians, course only them were written as Ukrainians. So, when it was needed to write about Ukrainians in Auschwitz historians found these persons first of all. It was also very good that, for instance, one of them – Omelian Koval wrote and published his memories about life in Auschwitz and Ukrainians nationalists here.

Also we can find in Ukrainian media information about biographies of some survivors from Auschwitz – citizens of Ukraine and their memories. These memories mostly were collected during last years, so we don't have a lot of them (Hanna Stryzhkova/Koval; Anastasia Guley; Olena Trycheva, who were prisoners in Auschwitz in the childhood). It was also interview with Anastasia Guley. These stories were taken by a lot of Ukrainian media

from exhibition “Human triumph: the inhabitants of Ukraine who passed the Nazi concentration camps”. Media like such stories, course they are personalized.

On some sources we can also find information in Ukrainian media about Romi and Jews from Zakarpattia, who were killed in Auschwitz and homage of killed romi memorizing in Ukraine, but it was not a lot.

As Ukrainian historian who works on the idea of Ukrainian exhibition in Auschwitz Viktoria Yaremenko told in here big interview to web-site “Zbruch”, we will have also a research work in the field of identification of Ukrainians among Auschwitz prisoners, first of all – war prisoners in the future.

So, as we see, we have not a lot of themes connected Auschwitz and Ukraine, good media support, but research work is only beginning.

As I told before, historical memory is shaping not only by historians and we have precedents in Ukraine of publications translated fiction books (based on the true memories) about Auschwitz. First of all it was publication of Tadeush Borovskii’s book “Here in Auschwitz” in 2014 and then – Heather Morrise’s book “Tattooist of Auschwitz” in 2018.

As you know, inscription on the gateway of Auschwitz became a symbol of Nazi concentration camp. Its copy was used in this context in the exhibition of the museum “The memory of the Jewish people and the Holocaust in Ukraine” in Dnipro city as one of the Holocaust illustrations.

The inscription on the gateway also helped to identify hint on the Auschwitz in infamous known computer game – “The cost of freedom”, where players could play for the overseers. It was private initiative and creation of the game was stopped after scandal. Game creator Dmytro Dubin apologized to everyone who was offended. He also argued, that video clip from the game demonstrated in Poland had other voice acting than in original. And original didn’t have some sentences demonstrated in Poland. This fact was widespread illuminated in Ukrainian media. Main position was so, that it was look like provocation and that Dubin’s games develop company “Aliens Games” had Russian capital. But we also had some critic publications.

What I really would like to say is an original comic “Among the sheeps”, created by an artist Olexandr Koreshkov, where (in promo-materials of still not created part) we can also see an inscription on the gateway looks like Auschwitz. This comic include a critic of communist’s and Nazi totalitarian systems in created him fantastic world with two big states – sheep’s (communists) and goats (Nazi) and war between them. He didn’t create an edition about goats yet, but create some promo-materials. Among them – 3D model of a prison with inscription look like Auschwitz but another words. We can read here: “Swan Island”. It is the reference to ballet “Swan Lake”, which was showed on TV during putsch in 1991 in Russia, when communists tried to restore USSR. Ballet “Swan Lake” became a symbol of mass-media lie, trying to demonstrate that everything is all right when nothing is OK.

It is difficult to make any conclusion. As for me, remembering of World War II in Ukraine is still not past. This war very much included to modern political discourse and information war. Modern politic of remembering directed mainly on the denunciation of propaganda myth. It is hardly to do in modern global world, course propaganda doesn’t have borders, but it is also not bad, course people can see different information and sometimes makes own conclusions. Historians work and their researches is very important, but historical memory shaping not only by historians. People want to feel emotions, so influence of personal stories is higher than statistic and influence of art works (paintings, comic books, novels, films and games) is also higher than historical works. Auschwitz is rather good represented in Ukrainian media space and main thesis about it – that it is good initiative to have such museum, but as for me we a number of art works and exhibitions connected with it can be higher.