

Shifting Memories: WWII Remembrances in Ukraine from the Soviet Era to the Present War

I remember when I was 4 years old, I often visited my grandmother in summer. She lived in a small town near the Polish border. Once, we were walking through a local park when she pointed out a small building among the trees. "The Jewish rabbi is buried there," she said. I didn't understand what she meant. But somehow I remembered this episode. Maybe because she said the words "Jewish rabbi" in Polish – "Rabin Żydowski". My grandmother loved using Polish words, as she studied at the Polish school. Later on, I learned that the town, which belonged to Poland back then, had a Jewish community that accounted for about 60% of the population.

This was before the Second World War. Almost the entire community died during the Shoah. Now there are no Jews in the city at all. All of the synagogues and the Jewish cemetery were destroyed, and many other Jewish buildings were turned over during the Soviet Union. Almost nothing reminded one of those people at the beginning of the 2000s. Probably, I was one of the few among my peers who knew that the site of the city park and school was a large Jewish cemetery before.

What could you learn from the public spaces of those times? Streets and squares, named after Red Army heroes, Great Patriotic War memorials and Soviet heroes monuments, made to immortalize their feat, solemn holiday demonstrations and speeches that resembled those events. What I knew, as a kid, was that the war started on June 22nd, at 4 am, when Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union. The heroic myths of the border guards or Brest fortress heroes were alive in public memories.

A typical monument or memorial tablet informed you about the immortal feat of the World War II (or, in most cases, the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945) heroes. The memorable day was the 9th of May, Victory Day. Parades and solemn demonstrations were held in almost every city. And even in my town

with a population of about 35 thousand people, there was usually a parade with military equipment and columns of soldiers. Somewhere in the beginning of 2010, the columns of military equipment disappeared. Probably it became too costly. Therefore, only marches of soldiers, veterans, and other demonstrators took place. Normally, Victory Day ended with a festive concert with well-known military songs. What was interesting was that the bands of Afghan soldiers also performed there, and songs about the war in Afghanistan (1979-1989) were sung. Everything was intertwined with the general narrative of the heroic Soviet Red Army.

The first serious attempts at rethinking date back to 2014, with the beginning of the Russian annexation of eastern Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea. Ukraine retired the Soviet concept of the "Great Patriotic War" (1941–1945), which skipped the 1939–1941 period or the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Instead, Ukraine officially framed the conflict within the full scope of World War II (1939–1945). In 2015, Ukraine instituted May 8 as the Day of Remembrance and Reconciliation, aligning with Western Europe, while keeping May 9 as Victory Day. The Soviet-promoted St. George ribbon was replaced by the red poppy as the primary symbol of memory, and the slogan "Never again" (Nikoly znovu) was invented.

The role of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) and the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), who fought against both Nazi and Soviet forces, was brought into official state history. While this remains a subject of some debate, state policy honors them as fighters for Ukrainian independence. In this case, there are still misunderstandings between Ukrainians and Poles based on national liberation movements and their actions (the Ukrainian Insurgent Army and the Armia Krajowa, who fought against each other).

Commemoration of the Holocaust / Shoah (including arrangements of memorial sites such as Babyn Yar, Sosenky, Pyatidni) has been integrated into national memory. Today Ukraine officially recognizes and honors Ukrainians designated as Righteous Among the Nations. At the same time, the topics of anti-Semitism and the participation of the local population in the

Jewish pogroms still require additional studies. The topic that has also begun to be studied is anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union and the silencing of the Holocaust.

Remembrance policies emphasize that millions of Ukrainians served across various Allied forces, including the Red Army, Western Allied militaries, and underground resistance movements.

Another aspect is the persecution of so-called unreliable nations by the Soviet Union after WWII. For example, the deportation of the Crimean Tatars that was carried out by the Soviet regime on May 18–21, 1944, is more studied by researchers.

Under the 2015 Decommunization Laws, Soviet symbols (hammer and sickle, red stars, Lenin statues) were dismantled across public spaces. For example, the iconic 102-meter Motherland Monument in Kyiv was renamed the Mother Ukraine Monument, and the Soviet coat of arms on its shield was replaced with the Ukrainian Trident (Tryzub) in 2023. Before that, a survey was conducted. More than 778 thousand Ukrainians took part in the vote. The majority (85%) supported replacing it with a trident, 9% wanted to remove the Soviet coat of arms and leave the shield clean, and 6% wanted to leave everything unchanged. Besides, in 2023, Ukraine formally moved the official holiday to May 8, designating May 9 as Europe Day.

Today, WWII remembrance in Ukraine is heavily influenced by the ongoing defense against Russia's invasion. Public discourse links WWII resistance to the current war, drawing explicit parallels between Nazi German aggression and modern Russian state aggression. Obviously, the new war has displaced the memory of the past war. It's also a difficult time for Ukrainian scholars who are not able to fully focus on their research.

Despite these shifts, several critical subjects remain sidelined or even taboo within Ukrainian academia. In particular, scholarly attention rarely extends to the ideometrical roots of Nazism, its broader misanthropic ideology, or the systematic persecution of marginalized groups such as queer people, individuals with disabilities, and the Sinti and Roma. While certain aspects of

WWII history—such as the deportation of Ukrainian forced laborers—are actively researched, Ukrainian memory studies must broaden their scope. Embracing these understudied narratives and collaborating with European partners, particularly neighboring states, is essential for aligning Ukraine with European multiperspectivity and fully integrating the Ukrainian narrative into the shared European experience.