Memory Crash

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In the middle of the 2000s, I was involved, somewhat unexpectedly, in the formal evaluation of history textbooks in Ukraine. While reviewing the content of most textbooks on the history of Ukraine, I was stunned not only by the low quality of the tools that were used to educate young citizens but also by the dismal uniformity of textbook content, despite the fact that every grade had two to five titles—produced by different authors with state financing—from which to choose. In fact, I dealt with one single meta-text with some ornamental variations owing to authors’ individual cultural backgrounds. It was obvious that the existence of a single officially approved narrative for textbooks was not the only reason for this uniformity; there had to be something else at play. This “something,” which some fifty years ago was named the power of discourse, became the focus of my interest.

From 2006 to 2008, I became an involved observer of the massive state campaign to prepare for the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Great Famine of 1932–33, which by this time was officially named the Holodomor. The eagerness of respected professional historians to execute the government’s orders and cater to “public demand” made an indelible impression on me. I had not yet forgotten a similar situation during the 1980s, when the same people in the same manner followed orders to combat the “falsifications of the bourgeois Ukrainian nationalists about the man-made famine in the USSR.”

The promotion of the idea that the famine aimed at the destruction of the Ukrainian nation was obviously at odds with some of the basic rules and procedures of history as an academic discipline. However, at the same time, it was eminently suitable to the ideological and political interests of part of the ruling elite, and it responded to the expectations of a part of society that saw in the genocidal version of the event an explanation for the contempo-
rary problems and challenges in Ukraine. Observing historians, I discovered that while they were often motivated by either a deliberate desire to respond to political demands or banal opportunism, there were other reasons for their conduct. I had a feeling that many historians believed they had some sort of mission and that there was some magic potion — which they themselves invented—that had taken over their minds.

It was easy for me to recognize some of these formulas and stereotypes because in the late 1980s and early 1990s, I had actively helped fill in the “blank spots” of Ukrainian history. I had been a critic of Stalinism and a convinced “enlightener of the people”; however, I believed all of this to be a closed chapter for me and my professional colleagues. By the middle of the 2000s, professional Ukrainian historiography largely outgrew the limits of the classic national canon, but historical politics and the historiography subordinated to its interests reproduced this canon, sometimes grotesquely. My colleagues, whose basic professional qualifications could not be impeached, enthusiastically took part in this enterprise.

The reaction of engaged segments of society was no less impressive: as it turned out, the issues of the past worried them no less than the issues of the present; in fact, sometimes the past worried them more than the present. The mechanisms of state and public demand looked remarkably similar: a segment of elites and society as a whole again voiced claims for “true” history despite this version having been solidly entrenched in school textbooks; another part of the population defended the “untrue” history, and both sides reproduced Soviet-style practices. Even the official requests state organs sent to academic institutes resembled the requests of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine. The only novelty was that a much broader circle was involved in making them.

The mysteries and ambiguities of the emergence and development of discursive forms with their powerful influence on society and on those who call themselves intellectuals intrigued me. This is how I came to understand the necessity of studying historical politics. It resulted in several books and a number of articles dedicated to this phenomenon in Ukraine, Russia, and Poland. Some materials written between 2009 and 2015 became a part of this book though, of course, I updated and augmented them. The events of 2015–19 followed with a third advent of the ideologically driven version of national memory and history, where the former was hardly distinguish-
able from the latter, which clearly demonstrated that this topic deserves a meticulously researched study.

It was not an easy decision to write a separate book about historical politics. One of my colleagues whose opinion I trust remarked once that the description of historical politics in a given country in a given period can fit into a single academic article. The appropriateness of this opinion is partially confirmed by the fact that a large majority of works in this area are indeed edited collections.¹ As my book was already largely written, I, being afraid of using a sledgehammer to crack nuts, asked this same colleague to provide me with arguments in favor of writing a monograph. He showed his solidarity with me and expressed thoughts that I include along with my own interpretations.

A general description of the tendencies, developments, and results of historical politics can fit into one article or chapter in a collection dedicated to the topic. However, a detailed report that enables the reader, with historical hindsight, to follow the genealogy of the phenomenon known as historical politics requires a longer format, especially if the study places historical politics in a transnational political context. I was encouraged both by the example of my colleagues who also decided to “catch the rainbow” and tackle sim-

ilar topics in monograph-length studies and by my own experience studying important aspects of this phenomenon.2

Additionally, I also believe that even though Ukraine shares certain similarities with other countries in the turbulent post-Soviet space, it is, nevertheless, a rather specific and complicated case. Cultural and historical diversity, which could have been advantageous for the country, became toxic as a consequence of the politics of history and the irresponsible uses and abuses of the past. Ukraine demonstrates how an overabundance of the past blocks future advancement. Moreover, the country’s preoccupation with memory complicates its perception of the world, and conflicts about the past become conflicts in the present.

This book is an account of the historical politics in Ukraine embedded within the broader European context. It delineates the main tendencies and events related to the use of the past for the interests of the present as formulated by certain social, political, and cultural groups. I do not discuss professional history writing and historiographical disputes on the topics outlined below.

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The book consists of three parts. In the first part, I delineate the framework of the study and offer the reader a set of basic formulas and concepts used in this study. I also examine the main tendencies of historical politics in three regions conventionally delineated as Western Europe, Eastern Europe, and the post-

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Soviet space. The second part describes the course of action and the functions of the main actors in the historical politics of Ukraine: the state, non-state institutions, and those without whom historical politics would never be possible—historians. Finally, the third and longest part deals with the practices of historical politics: the description and analysis of actions, effects, and consequences. I examine the “nationalization” of the past in its interaction with and struggle against the previous version of Ukrainian history and memory.

As it turns out, even a monograph is not sufficient for an exhaustive treatment of the topic promised in the title of the book. Many stories and events remained outside the scope of this work, and many others were touched upon only superficially.

I do not claim to have managed to stay within the limits of disciplinary objectivity so well described by Allan Megill. I was not simply an observer and eyewitness of the processes described in the book; I was also a participant. Instead of confining myself to academic discussions, I brought my ideas and reasoning to broader circles of listeners, interlocutors, and opponents.

Just like some of my colleagues who try to consider history an academic discipline rather than a mouthpiece of the ruling class or public interest, I learned a lot of things about myself when I shared my findings with the broader public. I made a personal collection of epithets, threats, and specific wishes meant for me: I was an “agent of Moscow” and Washington D.C., a “libtard,” a turncoat, and, of course, I do not mention here the vocabulary of those who write on walls and in public toilets. This collection might one day be useful for understanding the public atmosphere and for appreciating the communication culture of a period when the problems of the past, instead of staying in the domain of intellectuals and specialists, started to be discussed by the hoi polloi, by politicians only one step removed from them, and by quill-drivers.

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3 A very telling episode occurred recently. The Ukrainian ambassador to Germany Mr. Andrii Mel’nyk demanded the German-Ukrainian Commission of Historians to exclude me from participation in the academic seminar, unjustifiably accusing me of being a “Holodomor denier.” Meanwhile, his wife publicly coined the term “kasianovshchina” to describe those who, under the pretext of “academic freedom,” hamper the efforts of Ukraine to ensure the recognition of the Holodomor as genocide. See “SMSky vid posla: Yak Kyiv pozbuvsia nezruchnykh istorykiv,” September 30, 2020, https://www.dw.com/uk/smksky-vid-posla-yak-kyiv-pozbivsa-nezruchnykh-istorykiv/a-55094491; “Zbir koshtiv dla muzeju Holodomoru,” accessed December 12, 2020, https://www.zernapravdy.org/uk/campaigns/sprout-the-grains-of-truth-together-with-svitlana-melnyk/.
In any case, I tried to do my best to stay within the limits of a balanced academic approach to problems in which people are emotionally invested and which pose ethical dilemmas. I must admit that I do not sympathize (and never did) with either the phenomenon or with the large majority of its subjects. The reasons for my attitude are not only ethical, aesthetic, or professional; unfortunately, proponents of historical politics have an explicit or implicit desire (rather explicit in the Ukrainian case) to force everyone to sing along, including people who are not really suited to this exciting activity.

In this somewhat protracted research adventure, I received moral, intellectual, and often institutional support from colleagues and friends, to whom I express my most sincere gratitude.

First, my thanks to Alexei Miller, with whom I started discussing the problems of the interaction of history and politics in the early 2000s. These discussions resulted in a book that still enjoys attention.4 Despite our friendly relations, or perhaps precisely because of them, our discussions could be very pointed, and we would often agree to disagree, maintaining respect for each other. Communication with Oleksiy Tolochko was no less important for me. Oleksiy is a world-class scholar, erudite and equipped with the most recent findings in the field. He is a true intellectual and fortunately not a public one. These two were the first readers and benevolent critics of this book. The first version of this book was read and commented on by my Polish colleague Tomasz Stryjek, one of the most competent researchers of contemporary Ukrainian historiography and the politics of memory.

Comments given by such high-caliber scholars have helped make my text better at every stage. I paid heed to many of their remarks and suggestions, especially with regard to fringe interpretations, but in many cases I remained steadfast in my reading, so my friends and colleagues are only responsible for the strongest points of the book. I, the author, am responsible for its flaws.

At various stages I was helped by my doctoral students Oleksandra Haidai and Andriy Liubarets who helped me collect materials and improve my text. I am thankful for their time and their effort, and I hope that our cooperation was mutually rewarding.

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A large part of the text of this book was prepared during my residency at Imre Kertész Kolleg in Jena, Germany. I am especially grateful to the group of “student assistants” for their help in accessing and exploring the works of German colleagues. The final version of the text was completed during my stay at the University of Basel within the framework of the Ukrainian Research in Switzerland (URIS) program and at the University of North Carolina, in one of the most charming localities in the United States, Chapel Hill.

The Ukrainian version of this book was published by Laurus Publishing House in Kyiv in 2018. The Russian edition by Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie was published in Moscow in 2019. The English version, abridged and updated, was completed in 2020 under the circumstances of COVID-19.