Memory Crash

Kasianov, Georgiy

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Historical politics deals with identity. This statement is hardly new, but it should be said, nevertheless. The goal of historical politics is to establish a certain form of “collective” identity and impose it on society; its agents generally use existing discursive forms, modifying them to suit their interests as they relate to the accession to or maintenance of power and the preservation of the loyalty of those subject to this power. Historical politics was born together with the era of nationalism; it is an integral part of the process of modern society formation and can be considered a kind of mass politics related to the shaping of new or reshaping of old forms of political and cultural loyalty of large social groups.

For a long time, the state had a monopoly on historical politics. Over the last several decades, this monopoly has been broken by the information, communication, and digital revolutions and by the development of civil society. An increasingly important role has been played by non-governmental organizations, media, and even individuals supposedly speaking on their own behalf, but in reality, broadcasting the interests and aspirations of social, cultural, religious, and other groups. Despite these changes, governments or intergovernmental institutions still continue to dominate historical politics: their intellectual, material, and organizational resources cannot be challenged.

This overview of historical politics in Ukraine and in the surrounding area, in a post-Soviet, postcommunist, European, or even global context proves that this politics has two modes of operation. The first can be described as the routine mode, and the second might be labelled the crisis mode. Usually, they coexist in space and in time. Periods in the development of historical politics can be differentiated by the degree of prevalence of one or the other modes at any given moment.

The routine mode includes certain everyday practices related to the formation, espousal, and diffusion/imposition of standard collective forms of
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identity, which can include, among other things, national identity. The creation of national memory spaces; the formation of a common memory narrative through curricula in history, literature, geography; “inventing tradition”—all this can be classified as routine forms of historical politics. Virtually all European states, both preexisting ones and those that emerged during the era of the establishment and development of historical politics, formed certain iconic forms of historical (cultural) memory, embedding it within the national identity of state-forming nations. European practices from the second half of the twentieth century also demonstrate attempts at establishing a supranational or transnational identity: the path from the common market to a common European identity presupposed the establishment of a common historical memory. In both cases, a project, strategy, plan, and a strategic goal was formulated and promoted.

The crisis variant arises from a quite spontaneous reaction to unexpected challenges. It is the result of the course of action explained by Alexei Miller as an “escalation of historical politics,” a mobilization reaction that is fast and not always well-considered. The crisis method of conducting historical politics usually arises from a crisis of identity and an attempt to respond to this crisis, or as a consequence (or a method to overcome the consequences) of a more local crisis situation, like a regime change.

Both variants existed in the period and region described here. In the late 1980s, the routine mode of the communist/Soviet period switched to the crisis mode because of the downfall of the communist system. In the 1990s, it was replaced by the routine mode with the restoration of a standard “Eastern European” national narrative, and it again mutated into the crisis mode after the enlargement of NATO and the extension of the European Union. Unified Europe, attempting to create a pan-European memory space, also acquired a pan-European identity crisis largely caused by the conflict between the efforts of supranational structures to impose this “common” European identity and the revival of ethnic nationalism fueled by populism. Judging by the dynamics of the events of 2005–20, we still live in a period dominated by the crisis mode of conducting historical politics. It is fueled by new factors: the migration crisis, the war in eastern Ukraine, the growing animosity between the “West” and Russia, and the crisis of the European Union. It is not hard to see that the forms of historical politics that consistently operate in the routine mode go into over-
drive in the crisis mode. The first twenty years of the twenty-first century in Ukraine witnessed four attempts to align school history curricula with the changing political situation.

Some basic elements of Ukrainian historical politics fit into the general European pattern, like the growing influence of civil society. Ideologically and, to some degree, geographically, Ukraine falls into the realm of the “Eastern European” type of historical politics, which are marked by the excessive attention of elites to issues of the past, the presence of strong elements of ethnic nationalism, populism in ideas and practices, a morbid sensitivity to the grievances and tragedies of the past, the blame game against neighbors, cultural complexes, and by a mix of nativism, isolationism, and a desire to borrow and repeat perceived “European practices.” Ukrainian historical politics also shares some elements with the practices and cultural patterns of the post-Soviet space, like post-colonial syndrome and the reproduction of behavioral models and practices typical of the Soviet period.

Finally, the case of Ukraine is really distinctive because of the complexity of its historical memory and politics. Ukraine is characterized by the exceptional sensitivity of social reaction to events in the sphere of historical politics, by a high level of spontaneity and conflict in said politics, by the existence of strong regional differences in the perception and representations of the past, and by the simultaneous existence of conflicting or competing memory narratives, the boundaries of which sometimes coincide with the borders of historical regions or certain ethnic groups. Another specificity of Ukraine is a lack of strategic understanding and vision among various interest groups that use historical politics to fulfil their tactical goals. Moreover, the rejection of what was done by one’s predecessors is a hallmark of Ukrainian politics.

As already mentioned, the Ukrainian ruling class, that is, the cultural and political elites of Ukraine, did not have a well-considered strategy for forming national identity or, consequently, a cohesive strategy of historical politics. The actions in this sphere were sometimes a response to unforeseen challenges, and sometimes they were defined by the “course of things,” by the logic of the situation. The rise of a Ukrainian national identity in the second half of the 1980s was a byproduct of the policies of the central government, which were themselves marked by glasnost and perestroika. The implementation of the standard national project in the 1990s following the
model and design of the nineteenth century was dictated by the logic of state building and by the existence of a certain template dubbed “national revival.” The intensification of historical politics in the middle of the 2000s was a response to both internal and external challenges, problematic modernization and memory wars, respectively. The festival of historical politics in Ukraine between 2014 and 2019 was a reaction to the internal social crisis and to external factors: territorial losses and hybrid warfare.

The main tendency of historical politics in Ukraine between the late 1980s and 2000s was the restoration, expansion, and promotion of the national/nationalist narrative of history and memory, coupled with the marginalization and removal of the Soviet nostalgic narrative (and in some cases, the Russian imperial nostalgic narrative). Their relatively peaceful coexistence during the 1990s transformed into active confrontation in the middle of the 2000s and has reached the phase of physical removal of the places of memory of the Soviet nostalgic and Russian imperial nostalgic narratives.

The dominance of the national/nationalist memory narrative and the elimination of its rivals in 2014–19 are likely to lead to the exacerbation of its own internal problems, in particular those related to an emphasis on the exclusivist model of memory. In fact, the national/nationalist narrative initially emerged as an exclusivist model (late nineteenth–early twentieth century). It was revived practically intact at the end of the 1980s and 1990s and gained new steam in 2005–10 and 2015–19. It absorbed certain elements of the Soviet nostalgic narrative and expanded them by absorbing milestones, names, and phenomena of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. It became the basis of the historical politics of the state. However, its semantic architecture, its means and forms of expression and representation, have remained unchanged since the era when the Ukrainian state was nothing but a project, and Ukrainians had to prove their status of belonging to a “historical” nation. In other words, a hundred-year-old project was being implemented at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

At the turn of the twentieth century, such a narrative mobilized the elites to accomplish a modern project, building a nation and its state. At the turn of the twenty-first century, it mutated into a conservative project that supported an archaic form of national identity that looked to the past, and the responsibility for this shift lies with the institutes and “mnemonic warriors” that promote this very iteration of the project. One of the possi-
ble reasons is the fact that the “modern project” in Ukraine was allegedly implemented by an “alien force.”

The modernization that turned Ukraine into an industrial and urbanized society took place during the Soviet era under the aegis of a state that recognized nationalism as a political principle only usable as a means to wage a national liberation struggle that was always subordinated to the class struggle—the elimination of class exploitation and eventually of classes themselves. Nationalism was perceived as an artifice of the bourgeoisie, concocted to distract the toiling masses from class struggle. The Soviet ideology of modernization rested on the Marxist idea of liberation of a human from his or her class and national chains. The achievement of cultural homogeneity, which was a necessary condition of modernization and a leap into industrial society, demanded the unification and standardization of the cultural space, especially in the linguistic sphere. Russian became the standard language, functioning as the lingua franca of the Soviet Union. It was the language of science, high culture, technology, politics, and social mobility, and also the language of domination and coercion. National languages (and, therefore, national cultures and cultural elites—including Russian) were marginalized, and their development slowed down. Research, education, industrial technologies, media, information technologies—in short, every dimension of industrial society—existed in the Russian language sphere. The overwhelming majority of world-class achievements of elite and mass culture were to be found in the same space, with the rare exceptions only confirming the general rule. Intellectual, cultural, and political elites of national republics, including the Ukrainian SSR, could cultivate a national language, ethnography, and traditions of everyday life, but only within limits that did not suggest social or political mobilization. Any violation of these limits was forbidden and repressed by the state as a manifestation of “nationalism.”

In this situation, the main carrier of high culture, the national intelligentsia, found itself in a kind of a cultural ghetto (sometimes out of necessity, sometimes willingly) where development stopped at the level of the “national revival” of the second half of the nineteenth century or, in the best possible case scenario, the game-changing 1920s (“the Executed Renaissance”). It is quite telling that the Sixtiers appealed to these very periods in their fight for the rights of Ukrainian culture and language, first during the Khrushchev
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Thaw of the second half of the 1950s to the beginning of the 1960s and then in the second half of the 1980s.

The situation radically changed in the second half of the 1980s to the beginning of the 1990s, but the window of opportunity depended less on the quickly collapsing ideological framework of the regime than on the cultural background of many of those who found themselves in the role of nation- and state-builders.¹ This cultural background suggested a return to the project of the early twentieth century, but in a radically different context, as Ukraine had moved from an agrarian to an industrial economy and had political borders, mass literacy, a developed system of education, and a political and cultural elite. All these had to be “nationalized.” This process of nationalizing the past, understood as a revival and the domination of the national master narrative in historiography—the creation and affirmation of the national narrative of historical memory—was not bereft of serious internal contradictions, which were dangerous for the process itself. During its first ascending phase (the end of the 1980s to the 1990s) its purpose was not only to create its own version of the past but to reject and erase the Soviet master narrative of Ukrainian history.

Carriers and promoters of the national narrative thought about and represented the whole “Ukrainian project” (partly consisting of a reconsideration and rewriting of history) as a modernization alternative to the communist/Soviet project that had outlived itself. The appeal to the past was part of both the renewal of the present and plans for the future. Participants in the process called it “national revival.” However, the very use of a term that emerged between the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries and references to the experiences denoted by this term were fraught with danger that was imperceptible to the champions of the archaization of discourse and the minds of those who dreamed of the “revival of the Ukrainian nation.” Narodnik-style discourses that sounded fine in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries sometimes looked like an attempt to replace automobiles with a horse-drawn carriage.

Somewhat paradoxically, these practices repeated the actions of the Soviet period that essentially cultivated elements of the populist tradition

¹ The ideologically motivated part of Ukrainian society. Those who used the creation of a new state for the intense initial accumulation of wealth only addressed “questions of history” much later, when it matched their pragmatic goals.

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in its national policy: ethnographism, enlightenment messianism, and the pathos of struggle for social liberation. One can recall the key figures of the populist pantheon adapted by Soviet authorities, Taras Shevchenko, Lesya Ukrainka, and Ivan Franko, who all successfully returned to the national/nationalist narrative of the past from the wax museum of the Soviet era or the Cossack myth that flourished under Soviet rule. Quite remarkably, the “new” national historical myth and memory narrative was largely just an extended and restructured version of the Ukrainian Soviet memory narrative. The main alteration that took place was a semantic shift from social to national meanings and the expansion of the narrative to include previously banned topics, facts, and figures.

Of course, the main promoters of the national/nationalist memory narrative usually deny any link with the Soviet period and search for direct links to the pre-Soviet times. This is why they use the following semantic sequence:

national revival → recovery of historical truth → recovery of historical memory → restoration of historical justice.

The goal of all this is the recovery of the link with the pre-Soviet era and the denial of the Soviet past. This denial, based on exceptional attention to the tragedies and losses of the Soviet period, has virtually turned into a denial of the whole Soviet past and, by association, the modernity brought by the Soviet experience. As is the case everywhere in “Eastern Europe,” the Soviet period for many Ukrainians is not recognized as “their own” history and is rejected by the national/nationalist memory narrative (with the exception of several “nationalized” Soviet-made key figures and events). The cultivation of antiquated forms of historical memory in the process of inventing tradition began to strongly contradict the reality that other narratives existed, the fact of the modernization of the Ukrainian language and culture, and the existence of a multicultural experience.

This situation made not only those who found themselves outside the exclusivist model of historical memory unhappy but also angered some of the carriers of the national/nationalist narrative who were cognizant of the need to modernize it. As a result, discussions about the possibilities and limitations of the national/nationalist narrative emerged within its own framework: recall the debates on school textbooks described earlier in this book.
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or the reaction of a part of society that was, in general, quite supportive of national history, to the extremes of decommunization.

Suggestions are made to “decapsulate” the national narrative of history and memory, to include other ethnic groups and nations, to represent the Ukrainian past as a space for the interaction of cultures, civilizations, ethnic groups, and nations. These suggestions do not transcend the borders of academic historiography, and they do not lead to any noticeable discussions.

By saying that the Soviet period became the time of Ukraine’s transition from an agrarian to a modern industrial society, I do not intend to say that the Soviet, Soviet nostalgic, or the related Russian imperial nostalgic narratives in their contemporary shape should somehow be associated with a modernization perspective. Their carriers and promoters also appeal to the past in order to preserve the status quo rather than to move ahead.

Mnemonic warriors and promoters of these narratives in the Ukrainian field of historical politics also do not fix any long-term strategic objectives, their interest being mostly driven by short-term tasks. Their goal setting is defined by current challenges that obscure the strategic goal. They cannot see the forest for the trees, and this forest takes the appearance of a strip on the horizon that one might try to reach either by walking through a field of wheat under an azure sky or walking on black soil covered in snowball trees, dragging a bust of Lenin or a statue of Bandera. The task may be referred to in broad terms such as the “revival of the Ukrainian nation” or the “restoration of the Slavic brotherhood,” but behind these rhetorical forms there is no

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3 Here it is appropriate to recall the previously mentioned foundational article by Mark von Hagen, published in 1995, that has only sent a few ripples across the lake of Ukrainian studies in the United States. The collection of articles dedicated to the critical analysis of the national narrative and attempts to offer alternatives, published in 2009 together with Philipp Ther, did not even reach Ukrainian readers because a prominent Ukrainian publishing house, for unknown reasons, stopped translation negotiations. The attempt of the author of this book, together with Oleksiy Tolochko, to propose a debate on the limitations of the national narrative in 2012, which was supported by the Ukrainian Historical Journal, elicited some answers but did not result in any further substantial action.
strategy and no perspective. Contemporary mnemonic warriors and interest groups behind them see as their main goal capturing resources and using them as soon as possible to further both public and personal goals, the two being, quite often, intermingled.

The same can be said about external actors when it comes to Ukrainian historical politics. The highest ranking Russian political class and a segment of Russian cultural elites have a certain general image centered on keeping Ukraine in the Russian sphere of influence as a part of a “common” cultural and political space in which Ukraine is not perceived as an independent subject. However, the representatives of these elites did not create any strategy on the “Ukrainian front” of historical politics, unless one counts as a strategy a somewhat loose idea of the “Russian world,” the implementation of which shifted from a policy of “soft power” to annexation, hybrid warfare, and Novorossiya that quickly went extinct. Such a vision, ignoring thirty years of the existence of Ukraine as a politically and culturally sovereign state, dictates the choice of erroneous tactics.

Moreover, this vision and the actions it generates provokes the rejection of Russia as a neighbor even by those who previously were inclined toward dialogue and cooperation. Indirectly, it strengthens anti-Russian moods and cements the position of the bearers of the exclusivist model of historical memory. In the opinion of the carriers of the national/nationalist narrative, the imperial and Soviet nostalgic narratives are increasingly associated with Russia and, therefore, with the Russian and Russian-speaking population of Ukraine. The situation after the annexation of Crimea and the hybrid war in Donbass aggravates the confrontation between these narratives and their carriers.

The confrontation of the national/nationalist and Soviet nostalgic memory narratives, represented here as a main theme of historical politics since the late 1980s, makes one wonder about the reasons for such an acute conflict. Observing public discussions and, recently, discussions on social media networks and at political actions and events, one cannot escape the impression that both parties are remarkably similar both in the manifestation of their feelings and intentions and in the means of their expression, so much so that their conflict sometimes looks like a fight between conjoined twins, which is traumatic for both. The carriers of the national/nationalist narrative and their counterparts from the camp of the Soviet nostalgic narrative
are similarly intolerant, vindictive, and aggressive. It has already been suggested that both narratives profess the exclusivist model of memory, and some features of nationalism and communism as worldviews (or, to be more precise, civil religions) may be regarded as similar. Two of these features are the rejection of the principle of pluralism and the promotion of antagonistic approaches to the past.\(^4\) The conflict between these two is instrumentalized by politicians, but its excesses cannot be associated only with this unsavory aspect of historical politics.

It can be assumed that both parties turn to historical politics to seek answers to the same questions: for instance, to explain and interpret current social and economic problems. Both look for their causes in the past. For the “Banderites,” the Soviet heritage is the root of all ills not only in the past but in the present as well. For the “Sovki,” the cause of misery is precisely the rejection of the Soviet heritage. Vexation, unhappiness, fear, and uncertainty are easily compensated for by references to the past and the perception of this past. To make it worse, the mnemonic warriors of both narratives started down their path in the mono-ideological Soviet era, during which pluralism was not accepted, or during the first years of independence in Ukraine, when social collapse pushed people to seek support in “hard” ideologies, which are not very compatible with the acceptance of pluralism as something natural.

As mentioned above, this work attempted to provide a detailed study of historical politics in Ukraine from the 1980s to the 2010s. However, even though the length of this book grew by one-third during the writing process, I was still unable to address many important topics. For instance, I wrote almost nothing about the role of the church in historical politics, and this topic deserves serious attention because, unlike state institutions, the church in Ukraine consistently enjoys high levels of confidence from the population. A longstanding discussion about “two or twenty-two Ukraines” is still topical. At the regional level, one can observe the influence of traditional actors as well as those who generally stay under the radar of researchers of historical politics, like industries and businesses. Industrial giants and business structures in the southeast often sponsored headline-making actions in the sphere of historical politics, while in western and central Ukraine,

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local initiatives were sponsored by medium-sized businesses. Of course, the regional approach potentially provides a much more nuanced image of the mechanisms of historical politics and of the alchemy of its influence on the attitudes of its target groups. This aspect has already received attention by the Ukrainian researchers Oleksandr Hrytsenko and Oleksandra Haidai, who were mentioned earlier, and this theme became the object of a years-long international project *Ukraine of the Regions*, a sociological and cultural study supported by the government of Switzerland.

I paid minimal attention here to analyzing the discourses of narratives of memory and representations of the past. My previous experience in this sphere (analysis of the discourses on the *Holodomor*)\(^5\) showed that, as a rule, historians who profess affirmative and didactical history are not very interested in such subjects, and when an analysis of this kind is offered, they do not notice it nor do they really understand it. This is regrettable because such an analysis might yield some understanding of the strengths and weaknesses, influence or helplessness of one or another memory narrative.

The manner of speech of the agents of historical politics, their ways of expressing themselves, are generally cringeworthy. This is a language of slogans and screams, and sometimes prayers and shamanic incantations; this is a language of captions wherever they are to be found—on walls, banners, or the on pages of legislative acts. This discourse opposes critical thinking, reasoning, analysis, and skepticism. It galvanizes people into actions that can result in the commemoration of pogrom victims or in a new pogrom or cultivate the feeling of pride in one’s tribe or a desire to slaughter people of other tribes or fellow tribe members with the “wrong” understanding of the past. The discourse of historical politics is nauseatingly primitive and can lead to so many absurdities that one cannot help but think about the banality of evil as well as the evil of banality.

Of course, almost all of the topics raised in this book could be the subjects of more detailed, systematic, and multi-perspective analyses. For instance, every actor engaged in historical politics listed in these pages deserves a separate biography. The same can be said of the multiple focal points of historical politics discussed in this book (Volhynia in 1943, the Holodomor, and

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the OUN and UPA), and the well-known figures and stories that remained unexplored (for instance, the experience of Ukrainian statehood in 1918–20). Some of these stories have already become the subject of separate studies on historical politics, and others are still waiting to be written.

So, this book is not about answering questions and solving problems, it is about asking questions and planning future intellectual journeys.