Stepan Bandera, Dr. Andrii Portnov, and the Holocaust: Is the Bandera Myth Detached from the Person?

On 8 January 2016 the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung published Andrii Portnov’s article ‘Mit dem Mythos Bandera stimmt etwas nicht’ (There is something wrong with the Bandera myth). Yet there is something wrong not only with the Bandera myth, as there is with every historical myth, but with Portnov’s argumentation as well. Although the article is written in an engaging format, it includes some misleading assumptions that result from the marginalization of the Shoah in the post-Soviet Ukrainian discourses on Ukrainian nationalism and East Central European history. In my opinion Portnov’s piece has some merits and enlightening potential, but it also holds several suggestions that do not correspond with the research on the Holocaust, the adaptation of fascism by Ukrainian nationalists from the early 1920s to the mid-1940s, and on Bandera and his political cult.

It is not my intention to polemicize with Portnov, but a certain amount of polemics is inevitable given his views on Bandera’s life and cult, and his opinion (or the lack of it) on the role of fascism, antisemitism, and the Holocaust in twentieth-century Ukrainian history. What is more, Portnov’s views on Ukrainian nationalism are typical for a number of other historians and intellectuals who simultaneously explain and propagate the Bandera cult. They marginalize the role of the Holocaust and mass violence in Ukrainian history, avoid subjects such as the fascistization of Ukrainian radical nationalism, and look at Ukrainian history through a negation of the Soviet narrative. While with regard to Soviet history this narrative does not demonstrate any major distortions (apart from the lack of complexity), it almost completely fails to address those parts of Ukrainian history that were demonized by Soviet propaganda, including Stepan Bandera, the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA).

Unlike countries such as Germany, France and Poland, a process of coming to terms with the Holocaust has not been initiated in Ukraine. This, however, has happened not because of a complete lack of critical and nuanced studies but rather because of ignorance both in the Ukrainian diaspora before 1991 and in independent Ukraine after 1991. It is not my intention to initiate such a process that given the current political situation in Ukraine cannot take place anyway. However, as a historian who investigates the Holocaust and trans-national fascism in East Central Europe, I sometimes feel obliged to comment on articles concerning these subjects. Every historical myth is an amalgamation of false and correct information. Myths distort the past to confuse and mobilize. Political and historical myths are products of minds. They are set up by real persons and are imbedded in real circumstances. In explaining a myth, we need to comprehend both its content and the circumstances in which it emerged. Portnov does the former, but fails to explain the latter. I imagine that he fails because the Bandera myth appeared during a period that is ignored, distorted, or marginalized by Ukrainian historians and intellectuals: the fascistization of far-right movements across Europe and the Holocaust. To call Bandera or people who propagated his cult ‘ antidemocratic patriots’ is incorrect and apologetic. People who killed Jews, Poles, and Ukrainians en masse while following a genocidal ideology of a fascist and racist type were much more than that. But this is what happens if we try to understand the Bandera myth through the Soviet perspective or its post-Soviet negation. We fail to understand the time and place or the circumstances in which the myth developed. Intentionally or not, we do harm to all the victims killed by the Banderites including Jews, Poles, and Ukrainians.

The post-Soviet narrative on the OUN and UPA omits all aspects of Bandera’s life that relate to the Holocaust and the role that he and his cult played at that time. Portnov, for example, explains that Bandera was involved in the proclamation of Ukrainian statehood on 30 June 1941, eight days after Germany attacked the Soviet Union, but he omits the fact that Bandera was, at the same time, involved in the preparation of the pogroms that happened before, during, and after the state proclamation. Similarly, he omits that the OUN intended to make Bandera the leader of this state, following the example of Ante Pavelić in Croatia and Josef Tiso in Slovakia. He informs the readers about the use of the term Banderites in Soviet propaganda, but he forgets to mention that the OUN members did call themselves such and regarded Bandera as their leader when they were murdering Jews during the pogroms in summer 1941 and when they, in the uniforms of the Ukrainian police, were helping the Germans to shoot Jews in 1942 and 1943. He also ignores the
fact that Ukrainian nationalists perceived themselves as Banderites and were perceived as such by others during the ethnic cleansings of the Polish population in Volhynia and eastern Galicia. Finally, he does not inform the readers that Bandera never condemned the atrocities committed by the OUN and UPA. After the war, Bandera, while living in Munich, insisted that his movement had resisted Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union without being involved in any atrocities against civilians. Any investigation of the OUN and UPA crimes was for Bandera anti-Ukrainian Soviet propaganda. So, is the Bandera myth completely detached from the person or the Holocaust from Bandera and his myth? Is a person with political views somewhere between Benito Mussolini, Adolf Hitler and Ante Pavelić best described as an ‘antidemocratic patriot’? Can an ‘anti-democratic patriot’ be a leader of a faction of a fascist movement? Can the followers of an ‘anti-democratic patriot’ force Jews during pogroms to perform fascist salutes to the words ‘Slava Ukraini!’ and beat or kill them if they do not perform it correctly? Where is the logic here?

If we try to determine Bandera’s responsibility for atrocities committed by his movement between 1941 and 1944, as I did in my study of his life and cult, we see that the reality is much more complex than the Soviet and post-Soviet explanations suggest. Bandera indeed carried a moral responsibility and also a direct, personal co-responsibility for some of the atrocities. The idea that Bandera cannot be responsible for the violence of his movement because he was an Ehrenhälfting (special political prisoner) in Berlin and Sachsenhausen, as some of the murders were carried out, is incorrect and is itself a part of the myth. It results from the post-Soviet narrative which has defined itself through the negation of Soviet ideology. Yet the problem with both narratives is that they lack complexity, are in many ways ahistorical, exonerate crimes committed either by the Soviet forces or by the Ukrainian nationalists, and polarize Ukrainian society and destabilize the Ukrainian state.

Portnov concludes by stating that the Bandera myth and other negative myths do not contribute to the establishment of a new democratic Ukraine. Yet neither does their post-Soviet trivialization. To foster democracy in Ukraine and make the society less vulnerable to right-wing ideologies and Putin’s neo-imperialist policies, we need to tackle the ‘negative myths’ (including the Bandera myth) and not trivialize them à la Portnov. We need to remember and emphasize the dark aspects of Ukrainian history that were blanked out by the myths. This includes the role of Bandera and his cohorts in the Holocaust, the fascistization of Ukrainian nationalism and the racist and antisemitic ideas propagated by the ‘antidemocratic patriot.’ This process involves not only the explanation of the meaning of Bandera in Soviet propaganda but also his role in the genocide of the Jews and his contribution to other atrocities.

Ending this short commentary I need to make two last remarks, which may not please Andrii Portnov but are necessary to foster a constructive discussion about the ‘negative myths’ and ‘antidemocratic patriots’ while highlighting the role of principles in intellectual discourses. The first is that Portnov summarizes some observations on the Bandera cult presented in my Bandera biography and previously published articles (selectively only on Soviet propaganda, not the Shoah and Bandera’s agency) without mentioning the sources. This is unethical but unfortunately typical. The second is that he has not substantially changed his views from 2009 and 2010, the time of the first Bandera debate. It began after Viktor Yushchenko, the president of Ukraine, designated Bandera as a hero of Ukraine. Portnov took part in this debate as a manufacturer of the myth rather than as a critic. In a review of this debate Per Anders Rudling and I concluded that Portnov’s ‘attitude is indicative of the confusion found amongst parts of a Ukrainian intelligentsia, which conceptualizes multi-totalitarianism as pluralism.’ It remains to hope that this confusion will vanish and Stepan Bandera will be taken for what he was and did and not for what he appears to be through the negation of his Soviet and post-Soviet myths.


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