Holocaust, Fascism, and Ukrainian History: 
Does It Make Sense to Rethink the History of Ukrainian Perpetrators in the European Context

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In the last few months several reviews of my book about Stepan Bandera have appeared, including some extraordinarily long ones. Some of their authors, such as Delphine Bechtel and Stephan Merl reviewed the book, summarizing its strengths and weaknesses, and pointing out its relevance for the current situation in Ukraine and the discipline of history. Others, such as Karel Berkhoff, Yuri Radchenko, and Oleksandr Zaitsev, did this too but they also integrated some polemics in their texts or placed special emphasis on their own interpretations of history. Some of them wrote more than one review of my book or published different versions in various languages.

In general the reviewers provided good and even very good analysis of the book. I do not intend to polemicize or to defend my interpretations of Stepan Bandera and his cult. This is not necessary, and polemics are not a constructive way of conducting academic or intellectual discussions. We can improve our understanding of history and its relevance for the current situation only through research, the development of more sophisticated methods, and open discussions. Protecting one’s own interpretations or outdated methods and ignoring the progress in history is not the best approach to writing and exploring the past, although this is unfortunately widespread not only among older scholars. Moreover, I also do not intend to correct the factual, methodological, and other mistakes that appeared in some of the reviews. In this short plea, I will confine myself only to those aspects that can help scholars of Ukrainian history rethink the role of Ukrainian nationalists and ordinary Ukrainians as perpetrators and the role of fascism in Ukrainian history. I hope that this will bring forward the process of rethinking the Second World War and the Holocaust in Ukraine, and strengthen the links between Ukrainian and European history.

1. What has changed and where do we stand?

As I started to investigate Bandera and his cult in Ukraine in 2006, after observing it during my numerous visits to Lviv and other Ukrainian cities for about three years, I was confronted with a collective denial of the involvement of Ukrainian nationalists as well as of ordinary Ukrainians in the Holocaust. This went on until 2012 and, in the case of some academic circles, even longer, although there were some scholars who did not subscribe to this dominating view. Only several articles published by John-Paul Himka, Marco Carynyk, Karel Berkhoff, Per Anders Rudling, Kai Struve, Omer Bartov, myself, and some other scholars changed this state of affairs. Similarly the contextualization of the OUN and the radical form of Ukrainian nationalism within European fascism was, at that time, and is even today, at least in some academic circles, considered to be a blasphemy, Russian or Polish propaganda, or, at best, an inaccurate characterization of the Ukrainian nationalist movement after the First World War. It was not only Ukrainian nationalist historians who claimed that Ukrainians did not murder Jews, Poles, and Ukrainians but also Ukrainian ‘liberal’ historians who for various reasons propagated this version of history. Similarly German specialists of Eastern Europe and National Socialism refused to acknowledge some aspects of the history of the OUN and UPA relating to the mass violence practiced by this movement. In 2008, during my archival research in Ukraine, Yaroslav Hrytsak informed me that he did not know anything about the murdering of Ukrainian civilians by the UPA during the conflict with the Soviet authorities between 1944 and 1950 and about the erecting of monuments to the victims of this violence by the Soviet authorities in western Ukraine. Frank Golczewski and Dieter Pohl, at about the same time, were sceptical about my investigation of the murder of Jews by the UPA and claimed that it was first of all the Germans who murdered the Jews in Ukraine and that the role of the Ukrainian nationalists was rather marginal, as they depicted it in their publications in the 1990s. Unlike them, historians such as Philip Friedman, a Holocaust survivor from western Ukraine, did not doubt that the OUN and UPA were involved in the genocide of the Jews or that they conducted a mass murder of Poles in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia. Friedman published his articles in the 1950s and passed away in 1960. So, how did it happen that during the Cold War the involvement of the Ukrainian nationalists disappeared from scholarly publications and has not come back until recently? Why did scholars who did not live in Ukraine during the Holocaust ignore the research of their Jewish colleagues, and why did they not hesitate to believe in nationalist or anticommunist misrepresentations of history presented by politically engaged peers?

Four important answers are: Soviet propaganda, the Cold War, difficult access to some documents in the Soviet archives before 1991, and the shortcomings of the methods used to investigate Ukrainian perpetrators, the Holocaust, and fascism in Ukraine. But why was it possible to investigate the crimes of the Nazis and ordinary Germans while the investigation of the violence conducted by the OUN and UPA and ordinary Ukrainians was considered to be anti-Ukrainian propaganda or not relevant to the history of the Holocaust or the Second World War in Eastern Europe? Why were historians who studied this history attacked and insulted by Ukrainian, German, and other historians and why did some of them decide to change fields or did not continue their careers? Finally, how is this connected to the designation of fascists and Holocaust perpetrators as ‘integral nationalists’ or ‘freedom fighters’ who, according to this narrative, claimed that they wanted to ‘liberate’ Ukraine or

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did resist Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union without committing any war crimes against Jewish, Polish, and Ukrainian civilians?

2. Fascism and the ‘integral nationalists’

There are many ways to contextualize the UVO, OUN, and UPA or the radical form of Ukrainian nationalism, which appeared in the early 1920s and persisted to the early 1950s. For a long time, beginning with John Armstrong, the author of the first monograph about Ukrainian nationalism and the Second World War in Ukraine, ‘integral nationalism’ was considered to be the most appropriate characterization of the OUN. The term did not establish itself in Ukrainian studies by chance. It was popularized not only by anti-communist scholars such as Armstrong but also by ideologically motivated veterans of this movement, and by some scholars of the Ukrainian diaspora such as Alexander Motyl. After the collapse of the Soviet Union the term reappeared in western Ukraine and was again promoted by political activists, veterans, and scholars. Investigating Stepan Bandera, his cult and the OUN and UPA, I was skeptical of this term and its usefulness for the exploration of the subject. To be clear, I do not object to the idea that ‘integral nationalism’ was a component of the ideology of the OUN but I do not consider it to be a good choice to describe the entire movement in this way or to classify its ideology as ‘integral nationalism.’ Apart from the reasons that I have mentioned in my Bandera study and to which Oleksandr Zaitsev, who has written an entire book on Ukrainian integral nationalism, objected in his reviews, I need to add that the term was misused to omit the investigation of the OUN’s involvement in the Holocaust and other forms of mass violence and to minimize its agency before, during, and after the Second World War. This was the case with the studies by John Armstrong, who relied on perpetrators’ accounts, ignored documents left by survivors, and in result left out all the central aspects of the history of Ukrainian nationalism relating to the murder of Jews and other forms of mass violence. Despite this, scholars such as Alexander Motyl and Oleksandr Zaitsev uncritically applied this term in their studies. Investigating Ukrainian nationalism, they confined themselves to its ideology and did not pay much attention to actual politics in Ukraine and Europe as well as to the mass violence, at least not the one that was practiced by the Ukrainian nationalists and not only ‘intellectually’ discussed or conceptualized in their ideological discourses. Motyl ended his investigation of Ukrainian nationalism in 1929 and Zaitsev his in 1939. By doing so, they left out the central aspect of the history of the OUN and UPA, just as had been done by Armstrong although in a different way.

I do not think that we can understand the ideology of a movement if we separate it from its history, especially if this is a history of interactions with other fascist movements, a history of its involvement in the Holocaust and of the forms of mass violence practiced by this movement. In my understanding we should write an integrated history of the movement and given that in the last six decades the ‘heroic’ parts of the history of Ukrainian nationalism have received more than enough attention we should concentrate on aspects that for political and other reasons have not been investigated. In terms of ideology and self-understanding Bandera was both a nationalist and a fascist. Similarly the UVO-OUN-UPA was a nationalist movement which adapted many elements of fascism and which for a time was a typical East

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9 For John Armstrong, see Rossoliński-Liebe, Die antijüdische Massengewalt ukrainischer Nationalisten, 216-218.
Central European fascist movement. If someone wants to designate this as ‘integral nationalism’ and use this term to analyze the Ukrainian nationalists after the First World War, they are free to do so, but they have to be aware of the problems which such a choice involves. The question whether the Ukrainian nationalists were also members of a ‘liberation movement’ is from my point of view no less complicated because they portrayed themselves as a ‘liberation movement’ but regarded mass murder as a ‘liberation struggle.’ I do not think that from their point of view ‘fascism’ and ‘liberation’ were contradictory, but writing about them in my Bandera study I put ‘liberation’ in quotation marks because the Ukrainian nationalists understood mass murder as ‘liberation’ and frequently used the word ‘liberation’ to cover it.

The idea that fascism can develop only in a state and that fascists without a state are ‘integral nationalists,’ as argued by Motyl and recently by Zaitsev, is simply wrong. Some OUN ideologists such as Yevhen Onats’kyi did object to this, and regarded fascism also as a revolution that could lead to a state. If movements could become fascist only in a national state or while controlling a state, then the Iron Guard would be a fascist movement only for a period of a few months in late 1940 and early 1941 and for the rest of its existence was an ‘integral nationalist’ movement. Similarly the Italian Fascists, the German National Socialists or the Croatian Ustasha would be ‘integral nationalists’ before 1922, 1933 or 1941 and fascist after that. I think that instead of inventing such questionable explanations of history we should rather study how the concept of ‘integral nationalism’ was misused by John Armstrong and other scholars in order to avoid investigating fascism in Ukraine and other East Central European countries and why it was readopted in post-Soviet Ukraine. As much as it may pain Zaitsev and other adherents of the concept of ‘integral nationalism,’ who have written entire books on Ukrainian or other ‘integral nationalisms’ and emphasize over and over again that ‘integral nationalism’ is a neutral term, I have to remind them that this is not the case. Neither is ‘integral nationalism’ less ambiguous than ‘fascism,’ ‘racism,’ or ‘liberalism,’ although a different type of ambiguity is involved. Its Cold War history and etymology suggest that it may be even more contested than other terms, and this may be one of the reasons why scholars of fascism use it cautiously and apply it only to these elements of ideology that can be classified as such rather than designate entire movements as ‘integral nationalism.’

My last but no less important objection towards the designation of the ideology of the OUN as ‘integral nationalism’ or ‘ustashism,’ another concept propagated by Zaitsev, results from an artificial isolation of Ukrainian history from European history and its post-Soviet orientalization. I do not think that we need to isolate Ukrainian history from European history or invent a tool of analysis that cannot be applied to anything but Ukrainian history. This could obscure our ability to understand Ukrainian history, European history, and could prevent us from investigating and understanding transnational processes in Ukraine and other countries and in the end isolate Ukrainian history even more than it is already isolated.

3. The opening of Ukrainian history and the necessity of academic standards

In the last few years, in addition to investigating Bandera and the Holocaust in Ukraine, I have also studied transnational fascism in East Central Europe and German-Polish collaboration in the General Government. These fields are less politicized than the history of the Second World War in Ukraine, and it is easier to conduct academic discussions on them or to investigate and present new findings even if some scholars, especially in Germany, defend their out-of-date methods or regard everything that was not written by them as wrong, problematic, or already sufficiently explored. Nevertheless, transnational fascism and German-Polish collaboration are less politicized than the history of the Second World War in

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western Ukraine. One reason is that scholars who work in these fields have applied academic standards and tried to avoid politicizing history. In my opinion, politicization is – after isolation, silence and misrepresentation of ‘unpatriotic’ subjects – another major problem of Ukrainian studies.

Especially important for the understanding of the Holocaust and other forms of mass violence in western Ukraine is the perspective of the victims. Similarly important are publications written by non-Ukrainian historians including those who are critical of the ‘patriotic’ narrative or look at Ukrainian history from ‘outside.’ Russian propaganda and the general political situation in Ukraine make it difficult to open themselves to other perspectives and to become critical of the national narrative, but it is still possible and can be achieved for example through international conferences. In 2014 I organized with Arnd Bauerkmper a conference at the Free University of Berlin about transnational fascism in Europe between 1918 and 1945. At this event, in addition to many other countries, we discussed the Ukrainian and other East Central European fascist movements which brought forward the discourses on transnational fascism in this part of Europe. This year I am organizing a conference with Katrin Stoll at the German Historical Institute in Warsaw about the conceptualizations of the Holocaust in Germany, Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine since the late 1980s. At this conference Ukrainian history will be discussed in the context of other histories and scholars of Ukrainian history will have an opportunity to discuss their interpretations of the Holocaust in Ukraine with scholars who studied the Holocaust or its conceptualizations in other countries or in Ukraine. I think that this will provide more transnational contextualization to the process of coming to terms with the Holocaust in Ukraine and will bring to the attention of scholars of Ukrainian history the necessity of applying academic standards.

4. How to write Ukrainian history and which history needs to be written?

In the last few decades, scholars of Ukrainian history have concentrated on the history of the Cossacks, the Sovietization and Stalinization of Ukraine, and have published quite a lot about the Second World War, especially its ‘heroic’ elements. In contrast they have paid little attention to the history of the Ukrainian perpetrators, the Holocaust, fascism, antisemitism, or the history of democracy in Ukraine. This was the result of many factors including the need for a national narrative as a shield against Russia and the search for a clear Ukrainian national identity. In my opinion, this selective approach to Ukrainian history has weakened the Ukrainian state and has destabilized Ukrainian society while denying its heterogeneous character and polarizing and radicalizing various political factions and regional groups. One of the results of this process has been the reaction to my investigation of Stepan Bandera and Ukrainian nationalism, a study in which I uncovered only a small part of the ‘unpatriotic’ elements of Ukrainian history and in which I connected only a few aspects of Ukrainian history with European history. Despite these reactions, including the militaristic ones, I think that scholars of Ukrainian history should continue to explore its ‘unpatriotic’ aspects and address the neglected subjects concerning the Second World War, the Holocaust, the fascistization of Ukrainian nationalism and the specific form of racism conceptualized to ‘liberate’ and purify Ukraine. A more pluralistic and critical approach to history will stabilize and pluralize Ukrainian identity and will reduce the political hostilities among political groups in Ukraine. I hope that the group of scholars who have investigated the Second World War and the Holocaust in Ukraine will in future consist not only of scholars who live in countries other than Ukraine but also of historians based in Ukraine because only they can make Ukrainian history more transparent and compatible with other European histories.

There is a wide range of issues about which we know little and which need to be uncovered and analyzed. Bandera was only one of them. From my work on the Holocaust in Ukraine and German-Polish collaboration in the General Government I know that the Ukrainian administration and Ukrainian police are two other important aspects that deserve
special attention. No less important is the question how and why the Ukrainian nationalists worked in the administration of the General Government and how they joined and tried to control the Ukrainian police in the General Government and the western parts of Reichskommissariat Ukraine. To investigate these questions historians need to analyze many sorts of documents including documents produced by the Nazis, left by the Ukrainian nationalists, accounts of Jewish survivors, and documents of the Soviet post-war investigations or trials. None of these documents should be rejected because they may not hold any relevant or true information, as Karel Berkhoff suggested in his review of the Bandera biography in regards to Soviet interrogation documents concerning Bandera’s behavior towards his family and an attempted rape.\(^{11}\) There is also nothing strange about the fact that Soviet documents contradict documents left by Ukrainian nationalists. However, if information from one sort of these documents is confirmed by another one, a historian is obliged to take it seriously and should not dismiss it because it is ‘Soviet,’ ‘Jewish,’ or ‘mystical.’ If in the case of Bandera’s private life this is a minor aspect of Ukrainian history, this may become a major one by the investigation of the Holocaust and other massacres conducted by Ukrainian nationalists. For example, in the case of the German-Polish collaboration, ‘sierpińówki,’ or protocols of the records conducted on the basis of the decree from 31 August 1944, are a crucial sort of document to investigate many forms of collaboration and murdering of Jews and other civilians. The situation is similar in Ukraine and many other Eastern European countries in which Holocaust perpetrators, collaborators, and war criminals were persecuted by the Soviet authorities and confessed to their involvement in the Holocaust or other forms of mass violence.

5. Where should we go? Or is it better to do nothing?

Scholars of Ukrainian history do not have the option of doing nothing, but I am not sure if they know where they should go. Reading some of the reviews of the Bandera study and also observing reactions to other publications about the ‘unpatriotic’ aspects of Ukrainian history, I have mixed feelings. On the one hand, scholars of Ukrainian history realize that all aspects of Ukrainian history including the Holocaust and fascism should be explored and the methods of examining the past standardized and professionalized. On the other hand, they invent concepts like ‘integral nationalism’ or ‘ustashism’ that may be important to write a specific version of Ukrainian history but are neither compatible with European history nor help us to understand the past in transnational context. Thus, I think that the process of rethinking the Ukrainian history of the Second World War and the coming to terms with the Holocaust and other forms of mass violence conducted by Ukrainian nationalists and ordinary Ukrainians will be difficult in Ukraine, if it will happen at all. Nevertheless, there are some good examples of how it can work including Poland, where in 2001 Jan Tomasz Gross’s study of the events in Jedwabne in the summer of 1941 and later the publications of scholars from the Center for Holocaust Research (Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, CBZZ) brought forward a discourse on the Polish perpetrators and the Holocaust in general and made Poles more aware of the ‘unpatriotic’ elements of their history. The CBZZ can serve as an example for scholars of Ukrainian history who are interested in a critical and comprehensive investigation of the murder of the Jews and the Second World War because this institution developed ground-breaking methods and has published several important studies with limited financial resources. Unlike Yuri Radchenko, they did not try to prove that they know everything better than ‘foreign scholars’ but concentrated on more basic and pragmatic activities such as the exploration of the Holocaust. Doing so, they made the history of the Second World War in

\(^{11}\) Berkhoff, A Power Terrible for Its Opponents, 193.
Poland more transparent, less political, and in the end compatible with European and transnational history. I hope that something similar will happen in Ukraine.