

## **"Victim" in the official historical narrative and its representation in different cultural spaces in contemporary Ukraine**

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### **Brief introduction: Specifics of Ukrainian historical politics**

It is quite difficult to present Ukrainian historical politics as a monolithic construct with clear guidelines, methods and techniques. The specificity of the formation of national historical policy is the lack of a monopoly of the state in influencing the memory of the past. At the initial stage of perestroika, the latter was formed under the influence of the politically active part of society, whose activities led to the opening of previously restricted Soviet archives and an active revision of the Soviet model of Ukrainian history. An additional agent of change at this point was the Ukrainian historians of the Diaspora, whose works quickly filled the gaps in the history textbook literature, for which there was an increased demand in the conditions of the formation of independent Ukrainian statehood. Historical policy in Ukraine did not become a monopoly of the state in subsequent periods as well. A variety of social groups, having their representatives in the civil sector, have maintained their participation in the formation of the image of the past throughout the period of Ukraine's independence.

The attempted economic liberalization of Soviet society in the mid-1980s provoked a significant revision of humanitarian issues, a rethinking of the past, and the relationship between the state and the individual. The emergence of alternative versions of history in the public sphere has created a situation in which many people have for the first time begun to talk about individual/family memory and trauma in the overall context of the traumatic stories of others. Experiencing and comprehending the collective nature of memory and trauma associated primarily with the Soviet totalitarian past at this initial stage created a dual narrative with two conflicting components with "Soviet" and "anti-Soviet" rhetoric. The opening of archives and the publication of previously classified documents led to a rethinking of the traumatic events of Soviet history. This one-step awareness of the scale of the tragedies of the Soviet period led to the rejection of the Soviet past and provided mass support for the processes of collapse of the USSR.

The "ideological (historical)" narrative was the most prominent, and becomes the focus of heated public debate. However, rational motives played an important role at this stage. Rethinking the experience of centralized redistribution in a "society of scarcity" in the coordinates of justice / injustice forms the support for the idea of decentralization and the creation of economic spaces at the level of the republics. Also in the Ukrainian context, it is important to consider the role of the disaster at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant. At this point, the catastrophe led to the questioning of the inhumane treatment of people solely as a resource and function by the totalitarian state. Much of the experience of people in the context of catastrophe has remained unspoken and unreflected. For example, we are talking about the experience of having to relocate people from a man-made disaster zone; about panic and fear in a society unfamiliar with the consequences of radiation contamination, which led to the stigmatization of people from the affected zone; about attitudes toward people in general and their delayed evacuation because of the system's desire to keep the accident a secret; about not informing people who were in the path of the radioactive cloud about the danger, and so on. It should be taken into account that the environmental agenda in Ukraine (the movement for the closure of nuclear power plants in Ukraine) became the basis for the formation of an attitude of rejection of the totalitarian order and the creation of an independent state.

Thus, beginning with the period of "perestroika" we observe the parallel formation of a number of motives - ideological (based on a review of the past), economic (raising the question of the injustice of the redistributive system in a "society of scarcity" and veiled inequality) and reactive (awareness of the flaws of the Soviet system through their personal or family experience). It should also be taken into account that the political mobilization of society took place within the borders of the national republics that were part of the USSR. Accordingly, within the initial "anti-Soviet narrative," its national-ethnic component became apparent rather quickly and played an important role in shaping the demand for independence.

At the same initial stage, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, we observe the segmentation of historical narratives. Addressing the events of the past, with its emphasis on the Ukrainian ethnic component, activates the emergence of similar narratives within the key national groups represented in multi-ethnic Ukraine. These narratives did not compete with each other in most cases, but rather existed in parallel and were unequally represented in the public sphere. Also in public discourse appeared the memory of local communities united not only on ethnic grounds, but also on a number of other criteria (for example, the communities of those who were involved in military interventions in Afghanistan or were liquidators of the Chernobyl disaster).

Despite the formation of segmented and counterversion memory of the past at the level of various social groups, the official historical narrative (which we can include speech and non-speech acts that reflect state policy) is formed primarily as a Ukrainian-centric with an emphasis on ethnicity. At the same time, the official historical narrative is not homogeneous and stable, but depends on shifts in power, political events, and the discussions of the past provoked by them. At the level of school education there was not and is not one history textbook approved by state structures, schools have the right to choose the textbooks that suit them best. Also, memory policy in Ukraine does not have at its core a well-established strategy for dealing with a complex and contradictory past and varies depending on political preferences and appointments to key positions (Ministry of Education, Ministry of Culture, Institute of National Remembrance, etc.).

In general, today we can speak about the presence in Ukraine of a segmented and non-homogeneous official historical narrative. Its main problems remain the lack of a strategy for working through the complex and traumatic past in public space (at the level of rhetoric of political statements, commemorative practices, expository techniques, etc.), as well as the parallel coexistence of counterversion versions of the past and interpretations of historical events, which are not denied at the official level, but also do not receive wide discussion.

### **Peculiarities of the construction of the image of the victim in the Ukrainian official historical narrative**

A significant emphasis on "victims" and "trauma" in the initial stage of the formation of the national historical narrative was due to the appeal to historical subjects that compromise the Soviet regime and the Russian imperial past. A sense of the common tragedy experienced, primarily in the framework of the Soviet regime, was a powerful tool for social consolidation. In the context of building Ukrainian independence, the victim model, in which the Ukrainian ethnic component quickly began to dominate, proved to be in demand and instrumentally convenient. Most of the totalitarian practices towards the population were seen as specific, directed primarily against the Ukrainian population. This made Ukrainian traumas visible, noticeable, but it also bracketed out the traumas of those members of society who were not embedded in the Ukrainian historical narrative. Attempts by representatives of various national groups represented in Ukraine to present their tragedies and images of victims in most cases create a situation of competition of memories. The latter often manifests itself in public discussions. The latter often manifests itself in public discussions. The counterarguments to the description of the trauma experience are not facts but counter-accusations, not empathy or rational rebuttal, but the devaluation of another's trauma through the declaration of the priority of one's own. The territory of Ukraine has become a field for

the unfolding of very different traumas, which, for various reasons, have been taken beyond the bounds of official discourses and narratives. For a long period the topics of gaining and losing independence in the early twentieth century, the Holodomor, the Holocaust-by-bullets, and political repression were closed to any discussion. The same "reticence figures" were the loss of people from the collapse of the Soviet Union, the consequences for people of the liquidation of the Chernobyl nuclear plant accident, the problems of forced relocation of people from the dying cities of Donbas in the crisis of the 1990s etc. As a result, we have the disappearance of the Yiddish-Land, a radical change in the composition of the population as a result of political repression and post-war resettlement. These traumas are different in nature and multidirectional. The victims are members of different ethnic groups and social groups at all. Taking into account the fact that all the victims are neighbors and make up a single social unit, we would expect the development of the victim narrative in Ukraine to follow the path of multidirectional memory. «Against the framework that understands collective memory as competitive memory—as a zero-sum struggle over scarce resources—I suggest that we consider memory as multidirectional: as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative» (Rothberg).

However, instead we have a duality in the perception of the current state of Ukrainian society that has persisted since perestroika, and represented by the concept of "two Ukraine" (Ryabchuk) or "two projections of the Ukrainian past - the Ukrainian own (which varies in spectrum from ethnic and patriotic to multicultural and liberal) and the Malorossiia (which contains a pro-Russian and Soviet component)"<sup>1</sup>. The duality of these models consists in the opposition of the Soviet and National projects, in the struggle of which only one must survive. This also forms a picture of the world in which there are "insiders" (those who feel they belong to the group on the basis of acceptance and agreement with a certain model of the historical past) and «others», often "outsiders" in relation to the victim group.

But, as we noted above, none of the models of the past is dominant and they all exist in parallel in public discourse. The duality of models of historical memory is actively criticized and reinterpreted (Hritsak, Portnov). but retains its relevance in labeling the national as "correct", "normal" and everything unpleasant, going beyond normality as Soviet. However, this duality of seeing the past still retains its relevance in labeling the national as "right," "normal," and everything unpleasant that goes beyond normality as Soviet.

It should be taken into account that in Ukrainian society the narratives of different social groups construct the images of "victims" and "executioners" within the same society. Often the heroes of one social group are anti-heroes for another, and complex questions arise about the relationship between "executioner and victim" (including in relation to one person, who in the course of his life can act as both). The parallel existence of these narratives does not lead to a rethinking, an acceptance of one's role in causing trauma, but instead creates a situation of competing trauma and victims.

Also we can see strategies of commodification of victim status, the material for which are tragedies, from the Holodomor to Chernobyl. This tendency does not grow into a full-fledged strategy, being represented mainly at the level of artistic ways of comprehending trauma.

An analysis of historical museums in Ukraine shows the need to represent Ukraine and Ukrainians as victims. The evolution of the exposition of the main military museums, established during the Soviet period, is indicative. For example, the Museum of the Great Patriotic War in Kiev was transformed into the Museum of Ukraine in World War II, its exposition was supplemented by a section devoted to Afghanistan (with a focus on how many Ukrainians died in someone else's war). At the same time, after 2014 a space of heroic narrative emerged here with a reference to the actual war. The combination of the figure of the hero and the victim is demonstrated by the Lviv museum "Prison on Lontskoho", the concept of which is built on the glorification of an ethnic Ukrainian who died heroically for the independence of Ukraine and for the freedom of other nations. At the same

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<sup>1</sup> Polityka istorichnoi pam'ati v konteksti natsionalnoi bezpeky Ukraïny : analit. dopovid / [Yablonskyi V. M., Lozovyi V. S., Valevskiy O. L., Zdioruk S. I., Zubchenko S. O. ta in.] / za zah. red. V. M. Yablonskoho. – Kyiv : NISD, 2019. – S.17-18.

time, the Lviv Museum of the History of Totalitarian Regimes "Territory of Terror," refuses both unambiguous glorification and the one-sided narrative of the passive victim. The museum creates a space of the responsibility to work through the past.

The problem of the competing victims is represented by the practices of commemoration of the tragedy of Babyn Yar, the place of one of the most massive actions of the Holocaust-by-bullets in 1941. The removal of the Soviet prohibition on memorializing the tragedy in independent Ukraine has not resulted in the creation of more than thirty monuments to individual victims of Babyn Yar, from Jews and Roms to victims of the 1961 man-made tragedy, priests, and members of Ukrainian nationalist organizations who were recognized as enemies of the Nazi regime. At the moment, a clash between several projects of the memorial center is unfolding, which pushes the topic of the Babyn Yar tragedy to be perceived as toxic.

A competition of victims also unfolds at the level of regional memorials, in which the merits and losses of the locals are recognized as fundamentally important in the face of the ingratitude of others. The victim-region message has been exploited throughout the years of independence, offering options ranging from "Donbas feeds the whole country" to "We fought against the Soviets until '57, when the other people cowardly accepted it. The lack of tools for public deliberation on trauma is substituted by denial of accusations and the invention of various formulas of self-justification. And this, in turn, postpones discussion and creates repression. In the absence of real dialogue and elaboration of the past, the latter is easily instrumentalized for military purposes, becomes dangerous, and, accordingly, any complex and ambiguous interpretation of it is immediately nominated as hostile propaganda. Where historical politics does not prohibit the existence of alternative scenarios of the past, but also does not create effective tools to work with it, the repression appears. The source of repressive reactions in this case can be both special state agencies and society itself, which condemns any deviations from the "safe" standard of national history, which is perceived as an instrument of social consolidation and a form of protection against the enemy. In such a context, any attempt to revise and recode the image of the victim is perceived as a threat to the conquered positions.

### **War as a catalyst for redefining the positions of hero and victim**

The war provoked a kind of redistribution of the positions of hero and victim. These conditions create a demand for a hero, which until 2014 was satisfied by the discourse of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA). Getting rid of the victim complex is proposed in the form of clearing the space of signs of the presence of "colonizers" (Russian-Imperial or Soviet). However, the latter does not solve the problem of dealing with the past so much as it reinforces the infantile reluctance to accept the Soviet past as a part of one's history and take responsibility for it.

### **Resistance to the image of the victim**

The image of the victim is extremely instrumental both in terms of political rhetoric and in forming an identity at the level of mass consciousness. At the same time, we see the development of noticeable tendencies toward the construction of identities in a "non-victim" context: when the narrative of the victim is accepted as given, but at the same time a consciously constructed alternative to this image is created. These trends can be divided into several directions: the formation of a message about the agency of historical Ukrainian culture; resistance to conditionally official projects of commemoration; artistic projects of dealing with the Soviet past as an alternative to the basic strategy of so-called de-communization; the creation of a new for Ukraine optics of dealing with the past in its own value frame; overcoming the idea of Ukrainian culture as rural and dependent on the Russian one.

The Ukrainian feminist tradition of the 1990s (Solomiya Pavlychko, Oksana Zabuzhko, and others) demonstrates the tendency to see Ukrainian culture beyond the unambiguous logic of the victim. The Ukrainian tradition is presented here as a modern, European one, breaking with colonial attitudes. In the 1990s, O. Zabuzhko proposes a model of escape from the rhetoric of victimhood through an understanding of the obvious advantages of the colonized over the colonizer. While the colonized has several cultural codes, the colonizer has only one. The last decade (especially after 2014) demonstrates a notable tendency to construct a Ukrainian narrative outside the rhetoric of the victim, in an active reframing of well-known artistic and cultural traditions.

Serious work is carried out in the field of actualization of the significance of Ukrainian avant-garde. The agency of Ukrainian cultural space in avant-garde painting (Filevskaya's research on Malevich) and in the development of cinema of the 1920s (research and public activities of the Oleksandr Dovzhenko National Centre in Kiev) is asserted. The Ukrainian literary avant-garde is viewed not from the perspective of the victim (such an optic was formed by the definition of the "Shot Renaissance"), but in the optic of the world project, proposed by representatives of the literary avant-garde, in all its tragedy. The policy of de-communization, the radical phase of which was started in 2015, designated the Soviet past as a period of external intrusion into Ukrainian history that should be discarded. The lack of instruments for working through the past has led to a trend of total cleansing of Ukraine's public space from the signs of the Soviet past. The infantilism of this position was actively countered by urban-artistic projects for the preservation of Soviet monumental heritage, mosaics, etc. In this context, it is necessary to point out the work of the curatorial group "De ne de" (Evgeniya Molyar, Leonid Maruschak) on the study and preservation of the monumental Soviet heritage; artistic projects of photographer Evgeny Nikiforov, about the fate of Soviet monuments after the de-communization laws of 2015; projects of the National Oleksandr Dovzhenko National Centre, dedicated to the Ukrainian Soviet cinema. The work of the "Territory of Terror" Museum after 2015 has taken on an additional focus: the preservation of elements of the Soviet past that have been removed from public space.

Ukrainian culture demonstrates a strong tendency to reboot the image of the victim with elements of constructing fundamentally new images. This happens at different levels of culture, from graphic novels to art practices in public spaces. In the graphic novel series "The Will", historical figures of the first quarter of the twentieth century are presented from a cyber-punk perspective. Artist Alexander Grekhov presented the iconic figure of Ukrainian culture, Taras Shevchenko, as pop culture heroes (Batman, Spiderman, robot Bender, etc.) in an effort to remove the image of the truly great poet from the crusty Soviet-Post-Soviet canon. We see the same tendency in the exhibition organized by the Ministry of Culture for the anniversary of Lesya Ukrainka in March 2021. In presenting the image of Lesya Ukrainka, more weight is given to her personal characteristics and political leanings, which in the context of the long-term canonization of the terminally ill poet looks no less revolutionary than Shevchenko in the image of Master Yoda. The fatigue of the canonical image of the victim in the Ukrainian collective imagination sometimes produces strange phenomena. For example, the specificity of the Holodomor, which is one of the basic Ukrainian traumas of the twentieth century, provokes the desire to revise its representation in the public space. As a result, we have the project "Holodomor-restaurant" in Ukraine, proposed by one of the creative agencies. In this project the "dishes" from the Holodomor period are presented in the form of a restaurant offer on the website. When a potential "customer" clicks on the link, he / she gets access to materials about the Holodomor and the ingredients of the meals. The project demonstrates both the weariness of Ukrainian society from the total domination of the victim narrative and the inability to work with a complex subject on the level of meanings. In the same context, it is necessary to note the aggressive reaction to the Shevchenko Quantum Leap project - images posted in public space often became objects of vandalism. At the same time, a number of museums (in particular, the Odessa Art Museum) supported the project by hosting Grekhov's works.

Ukrainian cultural practices are not closed in museum spaces projects for intellectuals. Often art projects become the target of aggression by far-right groups - not only in public spaces, as was

the case with the Grekhov project, but also in exhibition halls and cinemas, which makes gestures by museums that invite such projects not just artistic, but political. The theme of far-right violence is also emphasized in the artistic practices of Ukrainian artists. For example, Nikita Kadan works on the theme of mass violence in Ukrainian history, combining in his work images of World War II violence and contemporary far-right actions. One of the leitmotifs of Kadan's work is the refutation of the thesis "our victims are better than yours".

The issue of the aggression of far-right groups is in the field of public discussion and analysis. On the one hand, far-right groups are visible in the Ukrainian public space, but on the other hand they do not have wide public support, which is confirmed by their low political rating and insignificant electoral support. This situation makes it problematic to adequately assess the significance of far-right sentiments in Ukrainian society.

Contemporary Ukrainian culture demonstrates a tendency to reframe the understanding of the figure of the victim in the optics of multidirectional memory. However, these are isolated trends rather than the cultural mainstream. Examples of such trends are the main event of the literary life of Ukraine 2020, the novel "Amadoka" by Sofia Andrukhovich. The novel demonstrates a broad field of multilayered and multicultural trauma, deprived of a voice. The silenced traumas of different times find their own voice here and are presented in the perspective of multidirectional memory, which makes the novel an extremely significant point in the cultural space of Ukraine. A similar optic in the context of public history projects has a number of oral history projects by Lviv historians. Andrei Usach and Anna Yatsenko's project "After the Silence" explores the theme of the Holocaust as part of Ukrainian history and the Ukrainian trauma of the Holocaust. The "Territory of Terror" Museum's project "(Un) heard" focuses on the traumas of the totalitarian past as a whole. In Odessa, since 2021, the project "Keepers of Time", dedicated to the study of the multilayered experience of the people of the Odessa region during World War II, is being implemented. A large part of the people of the Odessa region were Romanian citizens before World War II. Residents of the region as a whole have very different experiences of collective memory during the war. Such local projects, devoted to rethinking traumatic experiences, are not mainstream, but have good potential for resetting national history.

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