

History writing and the state memory politics in Ukraine and Russia after 1991

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In 1995 Mark Von Hagen published an article titled “Does Ukraine have a history?”¹ Before and since the time Ukraine gained independence in 1991, this question in different variations has resurfaced and been asked many times by professional historians, politicians, and ordinary people within Ukraine and abroad². Different intentions were behind this question. The reason to doubt whether Ukraine has a history was that Ukraine, for more than 70 years, was a part of the Soviet Union, and its academic history writing and dissemination of historical knowledge were under the strict control of Soviet Communist government.

So *did* Ukraine have a history under Soviet rule? The short answer is yes, it did. But immediately comes another question: was it a *Ukrainian* history, and how was it practiced by professional historians? The next questions that emerge are how academic history developed, and what was the status of professional historians in independent Ukraine, and how different is it now from Russia? Historians in both Ukraine and Russia diverged from a single Soviet academic system that did not provide equal treatment and opportunities.

At first glance, during the Soviet period Ukraine had all the infrastructure needed to exercise academic history writing. History faculties or departments existed in all the major universities. It was very prestigious and simultaneously challenging to get enrolled in history programs. Only children of “reliable citizens” could study to become historians. Degrees in history opened

¹ Mark Von Hagen “Does Ukraine Have a History?” *Slavic Review* Vol. 54, 3 (1995): 658-673.

² Serhii M. Plokyh “The History of a “Non-Historical” Nation: Notes on the Nature and Current Problems of Ukrainian Historiography” *Slavic Review* Vol. 54, 3 (1995): 709-716; Ivan L. Rudnytsky “The Role of the Ukraine in Modern History,” *Slavic Review* Vol 22 (1963): 199-216; Omeljan Pritsak and John S. Reshetar, Jr. “The Ukraine and the Dialectics of Nation-Building,” *Slavic Review* Vol 22 (1963): 224-55. “Alexander J. Motyl “Can Ukraine Have a History?” *Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol 57, 3 (2010): 5-61; Serhii Bilokin “Chy maiemo my Istorychnu nauku?” *Literaturna Ukraina*, (1991, 10 sichnia), No. 3.

doors not only into academia and education but also to high positions in administration and even Communist Party leadership.

Several research institutes functioning in the Academy of Sciences of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (AN URSS) were tasked with historical research as well. The flagship institution was the Institute of History. There were also numerous scholarly journals at the republican level, which published historical articles. The main academic historical journal, *Ukraïns'kyi istorychnyi zhurnal*, was established in 1957, following the celebration of the 300th anniversary of Ukraine's "reunification" with Russia. This journal was under the strict control of Communist Party of Ukraine (CPU), which had to approve the publication of each article in it. The journal still exists, as does the Institute of History—only now it is called the Institute of the History of Ukraine.

But academic infrastructure did not mean academic freedom. Even a brief analysis of the publications and dissertations defended in those times shows that the scope of the questions historians could explore was very narrow. Above the CPU, the decrees of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CC CPSU) prescribed the interpretations and conclusions that historians could use in their research. Historians at the level of the Soviet republics did not have room to maneuver with their research inquiries at all. If they dared not to follow those prescriptions, they could lose not only their academic positions but also freedom and life.

It is hardly necessary to mention all the terrors of the Stalin era. Hundreds of members of the Ukrainian intelligentsia, including historians, were persecuted. But even after Stalin's death the grip was not loosened. In 1972, after the appointment of Volodymyr Shcherbytsky as First Secretary of the CPU, dozens of historians were arrested or fired under different pretexts. But all of them knew that they were prosecuted for the presence of *mistrial* "bourgeois-nationalistic ideas" in their works. The majority of those historians specialized in the Cossack period.

The historian and literary scholar Yaroslav Dzyra, who was among those fired from the AN URSS Institute of History in 1972, recalled how his supervisor reprimanded him:

You, as a research associate of the institute, need to make sure that all plans are executed at the proper ideological level. You are getting paid for this! Turgenev could write what he wanted... We pay you for what you

need to write, not for what is in the [sources]. Do you think that I don't know what is in those documents?³

The republican-level censorship mechanism was more cautious than the all-union one located in Moscow. It did not pass many publications, even those written to the highest standards of ideological scholarship ascribed by numerous decrees. Several reasons were behind this, the main one being that censors were afraid for their own career and life and did not want to take risks. Thus, works that touched on sensitive topics or were suspected of even the slightest signs of *bourgeois nationalism* were rejected immediately. Another reason was the unwritten rule that some topics of Ukrainian history could be addressed only by scholars from Moscow or St. Petersburg. Scholars from Ukraine who decided to undertake such studies did not have any chance to publish or defend them in Ukraine. For example, among such topics were many aspects of the history of Southern Ukraine in the second half of the 18th century. Publications by Moscow historians used "North Black Sea region" or "New Russia" to identify the region, but rarely "Ukraine."

It was also a ubiquitous practice for Ukrainian scholars, after a number of unsuccessful attempts to defend dissertations on such complex topics in Ukraine, to go to Moscow universities for their thesis defences. Some Ukrainian scholars moved to study or to work at "central" universities and research institutes permanently. They believed that there was much more flexibility and fewer chances of being accused of bourgeois nationalism there. But even those who moved and worked at central research and education institutions in Moscow had to stay within ideologically defined concepts. The safest zone was to study "the experience of building socialism and communism."

Academic history writing was under the total ideological control and a part of the mechanism of sustaining the state's symbols through presenting the past in a prescribed manner. The art, media, commemorative practices, and history worked around the one set of defined ideas, and contradictions in depicting the past were impossible to imagine. Everything that was not in line with officially approved versions of history ended up banned and locked away in special storage with restricted access.

There was no room for Ukrainian history to exist on its own. Institutionally, factually, and theoretically, Ukrainian history could only be practiced as part of Russian/Soviet history. The

³ Stepan Velychenko, "Istoriia, istoryky i istoriopysannia soviets'kykh chasiv': Interviu z Iaroslavom Dzyroi (Kyiv, osin' 1988 roku)." <http://www.historians.in.ua/index.php/en/intervyu/1199-stepan-velychenko-istoriia-istoryky-i-istoriopysannia-sovietskykh-chasiv-interviu-z-yaroslavom-dzyroi-kyiv-osin-1988-roku>; Vladimir Masliichuk, Andrei Portnov, "Sovetizatsiia istoricheskoi nauki po-ukrainski." *Neprikosnovennyi zapas* 3 (2012).

main conceptual and theoretical boundaries historians could work within were outlined in the official documents that were adopted to celebrate 300th anniversary of “reuniting” Ukraine with Russia. As Zenon Kohut, in his examination of the historiography of Soviet times, pointed out:

The Soviet scheme also assumed complete Russian-Ukraine solidarity and commonality of interests. Ukrainians were not to be concerned with the status of their own nation but rejoice in and glorify Russian accomplishments. At no point in history could Ukrainians have a legitimate view that would not coincide with Russian one.⁴

In 1991 when the Soviet Union collapsed, history was totally freed from the ideological control of the totalitarian state. Ukraine and Russia as new independent countries for the first time faced their complex pasts, each in its own way and with consequences arising from it. Numerous old and new emerging actors embraced and embarked on the process of making sense out of history. For historians it was a time of crisis in their profession.

Russia as a state immediately undertook the path of liberalization in the economic, cultural, and intellectual domains. Russia also declared itself to be an ideologically free state, and that was recorded in the newly adapted constitution. The Soviet Union and its main doctrine of communism, and all the perpetrations before humankind they embodied, came under heavy criticism and condemnation by the new liberal leaders of the country. The liberals campaigned to undermine the position of their main political rival, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation. In the first years, the Russian population generally supported the new democratic course of the country, but because the promised introduction of a market economy did not bring prosperity, feelings of nostalgia for the lost Soviet Union and its relative stagnating stability grew rapidly.

Meanwhile, historians tried to comprehend their position as professionals and fit to the new societal reality too. The fall of the Soviet Union was for many a real shock. The introduced plurality of thoughts was not something easy to transition to and adopt. The rapid pace of changes was dizzying. The historian of the Russian Revolution Stanislav Tiutiukin recalled his mixed feelings about that transitional period:

⁴ Zenon E. Kohut “History as a Battleground: Russian-Ukrainian Relations and Historical Consciousness in Contemporary Ukraine” in *The Legacy of History in Russia and the New States of Eurasia* (edited by Stephen Frederick Starr) (1994): 19-24.

In the post-Soviet period, this process has already taken an avalanche-like, uncontrollable character. In essence, it was a real ideological revolution with its reckless radicalism, undoubted achievements, and no less obvious costs and failures. As in the days of any revolution, in historical science and especially around it a lot of dirty foam and opportunistic crafts appeared. Some historians were in a state of shock and numbness, others ran “ahead of progress.” A certain tension emerged in relations between representatives of the older and younger generations of scholars, and between Moscow and the Russian “periphery,” not to mention the former republics of the USSR.⁵

Another historian, Yurii Poliakov, in his book of political analysis also depicted a very glum picture. He wrote:

[History] looked deprived of all the old conceptions but also did not create new ones, either. It was left with deepening polarization, the ambitions of new leaders, and establishment bastions of old deans and with undeveloped dogmatization and posturing unprofessionalism.⁶

In the progressive milieu of professional historians, intensive debates were centered around the problem of insufficiency of the Marxist-Leninist methodology and the urgent need to adopt new methodological and theoretical frameworks. The intellectual status of historians was also heavily undermined, as for decades they had belonged to the state ideological machine which was now depicted by the new Russian authorities as unhuman and morally corrupt. The years of *glasnost* had also introduced a new genre of historical literature that now dominated public discussions, and professional historians with their abstruse academic texts could not keep up with the rapidly changing social structures and demands.

The teaching of history at Russia’s schools and universities was also immediately pronounced as “inappropriate to new realities.” The obligatory final exam in history was cancelled. In 1993, the Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation adopted new legislation on reforming history teaching. Extensive discussions and work on the creation of new textbooks were launched. Historians outside Moscow were the most active participants of the created working groups and authors of the first textbooks. While new textbooks were being developed, the universities and high schools were recommended books by the French historian Nicolas Werth (*History of the*

⁵ Tyutyukin, S. “Sovremennaia otechestvennaia istoriografiia RSDRP.” *Otechestvennaia istoriia* 6 (1998): 55.

⁶ Poliakov, Iurii. *Nashe nepredskazuemoe proshloe: Politicheskie zametki* (1995): 205.

Soviet state, 1900–1991), and by Geoffrey Hosking, a historian from the UK (*A History of the Soviet Union*).

It should also be noted that before 1991 there was no Russian Academy of Sciences. The RSFSR did not possess many institutions at the republic level, including its own academy of sciences. Instead, it had the all-union central institutions assigned to command and oversee operations in all the republics. Thus, in 1991 the Academy of Sciences of the Soviet Union (AN SSSR) was simply converted into the Russian Academy of Sciences. This meant that many old approaches, concepts, and views were transferred without revision. One of them was the patronizing treatment of the history of other republics that had now become independent states.

Ukrainian historians were even more critical of the historical crisis they faced. Besides methodological problems, they recognized that the centralized Soviet academic system had deprived them of generations of professional historians and was extremely discriminatory towards Ukrainian history as a separate field of study. In his 1991 article “On the situation of historical scholarship in Ukraine,” the Ukrainian historian Serhii Bilokin lamented that the level of training of historians in Ukraine, even at the prestigious Shevchenko University, was extremely low. He emphasized the need to bolster the knowledge of Ukrainian historians of the 19th and early of 20th centuries, and of those working in the diaspora⁷.

In Ukraine the Soviet academic infrastructure was not generally regarded as something that required an immediate overhaul, but many demanded that it needed at least some reformation as quickly as possible. The argument was around whether new methodological approaches and scholarly practices could be born within the old structures. The old Soviet dogma that “the cadres decide everything” (everything depends on the people involved) gained even more meaning at that time. The role of individual scholars who managed to produce real scholarship even in the time of the Soviet Union was exemplary. It was therefore deemed more appropriate to channel energies toward research and production of new cadres instead of reforming the bulky system. Neither in Ukraine nor Russia was the academic infrastructure dramatically changed, and until now it still remains unreformed. But many new institutes have been created and added to the systems to address emerging needs. What happened is an adaptation of old systems to new realities.

⁷ Sergij Bilokin “Pro stanovishhe istorychnoy nauky v Ukrayini” *Ukrayins'kyi istoryk* 01-04 (1990): 104-107.

Ukrainian historians also faced the dilemma of demarcating Ukraine's historical past from the common Russian history. It was a catalyst of numerous future debates among historians within the country and their Russian counterparts who did not change their views about Ukrainian history and continued to interpret it as an integral component of Russian history. Historians on both sides were dragged into the identity-building processes in their respective countries. To say that they all participated unwillingly in those processes would not be correct. They were often the frontrunners, initiators, and also leading critics of the instrumentalization of history.

In Ukraine, the revision of history education started immediately as well. Textbooks produced hastily by Ukrainian historians in 1991–2 often became outdated before they even went to print, facts of Ukraine's history that had been erased or whitewashed by the totalitarian regime were being constantly rediscovered, making their content irrelevant. Another problem was the methodological unpreparedness of historians to deal with complex material. That is why a textbook co-authored by the émigré French scholar Arkadii Zhukovsy and the Canadian historian of Ukrainian descent Orest Subtelny was approved in 1992 by the Ministry of Education of Ukraine and used at schools in all regions of the country.⁸ That year a textbook by Ukrainian historians from the Institute of Ukrainian History was also published and immediately approved. This textbook was based on the historiographical traditions of Ukrainian state and nation-building that had been outlined by Mykhailo Hrushevsky and other historians at the beginning of the 20th century; it was later criticized for being too complex to use at schools and did not gain popularity.

The absence of new textbooks was not the only problem. Teachers were very slow in the adoption of new facts and interpretations approved by Kyiv into their curriculum. Also, substantial resistance was felt in Ukraine's eastern and southern regions. Many teachers did not want to amend the years of their beliefs and continued teaching using Soviet educational materials. Local, regional, and city administrations with substantial endorsement from metallurgical and engineering industry leaders voiced their objections to the new curriculum as well.

An initiative to create a new textbook came from the director of the Zaporizhia-based Motor Sich, Viacheslav Boguslaiev, and his deputy, Yaroslav Sukhyi, a historian by education who defended his dissertation on the history of Communist Party. At the beginning of the 1990s, the majority of historians specialized in the *progressive role* of the Communist Party in developing specific industries. Boguslaiev and Sukhyi created a working group and invited professional historians to join it.

⁸ Fedir Turchenko. *Ukraïna – povernennia istorii: Heneza suchasnoho pidruchnyka* (2016)

One of the group members, the historian Fedir Turchenko, recalls that the tone of the discussions was dictated by representatives of regional industry and government⁹. They demanded that historians create textbooks that would suit first of all the needs of the region, a series called “Regional Textbooks.” Another debated idea was to create an alternative textbook.

The Motor Sich group was very clear about what type of textbook they wanted. Ukraine as an independent state project was challenged by their regional version of history, with deep connections to Russia and all its incarnations that ruled over the region and the rest of Ukrainian territory. Besides Soviet-era interpretations and historical mythologies, the imperial narratives of *Novorossia* ‘New Russia’ also resurfaced in the discussion. The interpretations of events in Western Ukraine before and during World War II were the most sensitive for the Motor Sich group and their allies in the regional administration. The professional historians began to realize that conflict was unavoidable, as they could not deliver such a textbook. They started to think about approaching this project without the Motor Sich group, at their own risk. The Ministry of Education was contacted and the historians were approved to start the work. In 1994, as a result, a textbook of the history of Ukraine was published for grade 10 (at that time, the final year of secondary school). The textbook turned out to be very moderate and cautious in presenting the most difficult events, which gained it popularity in many regions.

Although this textbook did not escape criticism and controversies, several members of parliament belonging to the Communist Party of Ukraine published op-eds accusing the authors of falsifying history. In 1996, the Peasant Party of Ukraine refused to vote together with the governing coalition on government bills unless the textbook was recalled. At the local level, criticism came from various organizations, such as veterans’ and parents’ associations, in southern and eastern regions, with the most critical articles appearing in Crimea.

Meanwhile, in western Ukraine local administrations, in consultation with local historians, undertook a widespread initiative of renaming streets and demolishing statues to Soviet-era heroes. All of those processes contributed to the creation of divisive narratives, which were promoted in the media. A new type of historian—as *public intellectual*—started immersing. But because the historians did not possess exclusive rights to the interpretation of history, other actors heavily dominated in providing their (often subjective or biased) views on history.

In the first decade after Ukrainian independence, the most popular historical period embraced by both public and professional historians was the Cossack period. State officials were also very active in capitalizing on the growing interest in Cossack history. Numerous Cossack festivals and

⁹ Ibid.

other cultural events were organized during these years, and 1990–1 saw mass celebrations of the 500th anniversary of the Zaporozhian Cossacks.¹⁰

The interest in the Cossack period was fueled by different narratives. A romanticized picture of Cossackdom was circulated in the general public discourse. Members of the popular Rukh movement presented the Ukrainian Cossacks as an important component of state and nation building mythology that could bind together Ukraine's contrasting regions and their different populations. After 1991 numerous Cossack organizations emerged, with competing political agendas and national and state loyalties, predominantly in the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine.

Historians that specialized in the history of the Cossack period unofficially enjoyed an elite status among their colleagues. However, new research was rarely produced in the first years. Instead, historians authored numerous publications for the general public and concentrated on reproducing the work of historians who were banned during Soviet rule. But as time passed by, new research projects and publications on Cossack history started to emerge.

Deconstructing the mythology of the Pereiaslav Treaty of 1654 was at the top of many historians' research agendas. Many of these historians aligned themselves with the needs of the newly created state, which was criticized by other *modernist* historians, who argued that *Russian imperial mythology* was merely replaced with a *Ukrainian national mythology*, in a strikingly similar manner to the Soviet times.¹¹

In 2002, when President Kuchma issued a decree initiating the celebration of the 350th anniversary of the Pereiaslav Treaty, that provoked a heated debate among historians. A committee was created to plan the celebrations, chaired first by Volodymyr Lytvyn and later by deputy prime minister Dmytro Tabachnyk. Both were professional historians by education, but the latter also had a long record of alleged anti-Ukrainian sentiments that he channeled using his official positions.

The celebration plans included the organization of numerous scholarly round tables, conferences, the publication of monographs and popular books, and production of TV programs. The nature of the proposed celebrations and the language of the president's decree were found by many intellectuals to strikingly resonate with the mood of the 1954 celebration

¹⁰ Frank Sysyn "The Reemergence of the Ukrainian Nation and Cossack Mythology" in *Social Research* Vol 58, 4: 846.

¹¹ Zenon E. Kohut "Facing Ukraine's Russian Legacy: Politics and History in the Late Kuchma Era" in *Harriman Review* Vol. 15, 2–3 (May 2005): 20–24

of the 300th anniversary of the Pereiaslav Treaty. It provoked strong criticism from many historians in Ukraine and the diaspora,¹² who called on their colleagues not to take part in any events organized by the Ukrainian government that allegedly engaged in the politicization of history. This call was not well received by all historians. Indeed, many respected historians supported Kuchma's initiative, stressing the need for dialogue to overcome historical myths. One of the opponents of the president's initiative, Professor Stanislav Kulchytsky, declared: "[This anniversary] should prompt us to address the following question: Do we, Ukrainians and Russians living in the 21st century, still need to have uppermost in our mind the stereotypes of common history that were embedded in people's minds in the time of the [Russian] Empire?"¹³ Kulchytsky is also an active critic of the crimes of the Soviet regime, particularly the Holodomor of 1932–3.

Cleavages among the ranks of professional historians were also growing around some fundamental methodological and theoretical issues. For example, at the Mykhailo Hrushevsky Institute of Ukrainian Archeography and Source Studies of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine (NASU) that was founded in 1987 as the Archeographic Commission of the AN URSS, a group of scholars led by the prominent historian Natalya Yakovenko left the institute because of these fundamental disagreements with its leadership. Yakovenko condemned the use of 19th-century historical paradigms in combination with Mykhailo Hrushevsky's historiographical approach, which was adopted by the majority of historians in Ukraine.¹⁴ Certainly, Hrushevsky's name association with the Institute speaks for itself. The group also condemned the institute's administration for ignoring modern methodological concepts and approaches in the analysis of historical documents.

As a newly (re)created academic institution, the Mykhailo Hrushevsky Institute of Ukrainian Archeography and Source Studies attracted many talented scholars, but soon its research mandate became insupportable to them. According to its mandate, the Institute's main research objectives were the publication and academic scrutiny of historical documents of crucial periods in Ukrainian history. Considering that archives had been inaccessible to historians for so long, the desire to bring historical documents of significant importance to the professional and public attention goes without saying. And there is no question as to tremendous interest. The problem was that the publication of documents on their own was viewed as an academic practice of past days, particularly in the fashion of the positivism theory of the 19th century. It was argued that if Ukraine wanted to develop as a modern country, it should also adopt a modern methodology concerning its historiography and produce synthetic and more inclusive historical research.

¹² The Pereiaslav Anniversary and CIUS <http://www.brama.com/news/press/2003/11/031114cius.html>

¹³ Stanislav Kulchytsky, "Try Pereiaslavy" *Dzerkalo tyzhni* https://zn.ua/ukr/SOCIUM/tri_pereiaslavi.html

¹⁴ Yaroslav Hrytsak "Ukrainska istoriografiiia 1991-2001: desiatylittia zmin" *Ukraina moderna*, Vol 9 (2005): 43-68.

The counterargument was that all theorizations are worth nothing until all historical sources are studied and the most important are published. Examples were provided of Central and Western European countries that compiled thousands of volumes of historical documents that cover the most pivotal moments in the history of those countries.

The decade of the 2000s was the period when memory politics in Russia and Ukraine were introduced at the highest levels. This reshaped the diplomatic relations between the countries dramatically. What is noteworthy is the relative role of historians in the politics of memory and the treatment of historians by their status. The launch of memory politics in countries associated with the presidency of Vladimir Putin in Russia and Viktor Yushchenko in Ukraine. Both are regarded by many analysts to have been sincere believers in the special historical course of their countries and nations. It was clear from the first moment that Yushchenko was sworn in as president of Ukraine in 2004 that his and Putin's interpretations of the past were dramatically different and destined to collide. Earlier, in 2010, when Vladimir Putin started his first term as president, he embarked on consolidating Russia's Soviet and imperial past into one glorified narrative. The role of Ukraine as a key component in the narrative of Russia's vision of the past was reinforced as never before. Any attempts to reinterpret the past that contradicted or undermined the adopted official line since that moment have been regarded as a security threat to Russia's unity and were even taken personally by many officials in Russia, including Putin.

For the first time, under the presidency of Viktor Yushchenko Ukraine undertook an official course to reconcile the memories of Red Army and UPA veterans. Yushchenko also more fiercely than his predecessors advocated for world recognition of the Holodomor as a genocide against the Ukrainian nation that was carried out by the Soviet regime under the leadership of Stalin. In 2006, President Yushchenko initiated the creation of the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory that was mandated to deal with restoring and preserving the memory about pivotal moments in Ukrainian history during the 20th century. The Ukrainian Struggle for Independence of 1917–21, Holodomor 1932–3, and Ukraine during WWII are the main topics the institute was tasked to investigate and promote awareness.

The Ukrainian Institute of National Memory (UINP) was created as an institution within the executive branch of the Ukrainian government, reporting directly to the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine. The first director of the institute was Ihor Yukhnovsky, who had been the first Deputy Prime Minister of Ukraine in 1992–3 and a member of the Presidium of the Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, a physicist by training. His deputy was Vladislav Verstyuk, a professional

historian and chair of the Department of the History of the Ukrainian Revolution (1917–21) in the NASU Institute of the History of Ukraine.

Historians played a key role in the functioning of the UINP. Many positions were filled by professional historians who came from different research institutes of the NASU and from prominent universities. Overall, the UINP employed around 70 people, including administrative personnel. In comparison, the Polish Institute of National Memory employs over one thousand professional historians. In general, Ukrainian historians reacted positively to the establishment of the institute, but there was also some slight criticism.

At the time, the working group created by the institute to assess school history textbooks received the most attention of the public at that time. The working group's main goals were to analyze existing textbooks and develop a new concept of historical education in Ukrainian. Prominent Ukrainian historians were invited to this group, and Natalya Yakovenko, a history professor at the National University of "Kyiv-Mohyla Academy" (NaUKMA), was appointed head of the working group. Its main conclusions and recommendations were that the textbooks: often mythicized the origins of Ukrainians and other aspects of the past; were overly focused on military and political history, downplaying the human factor; ignored local histories; cultivated pessimistic ideas of Ukraine's "colonial status," which promoted an inferiority complex and a sense of civilizational and social marginality of the Ukrainians; presented an ethnocentric version of Ukraine's history that ignored the country's multinational and multi-confessional composition; and that the history of Ukraine was not integrated into the context of world history.¹⁵ The working group also identified didactic problems with the textbooks.

Criticism of the conclusions of the working group came from their colleague historians. Because the members of the working group had never authored any school textbooks, they were viewed as unsuited to criticize their fellows who had actually embarked on writing a textbook and had no less a respectable record in historical scholarship. The most vocal was Yuri Mytsyk, also a history professor at NaUKMA, chair of the Department of Historical Sources of the Princely and Cossack Eras at the NASU Hrushevsky Institute of Ukrainian Archeography and Source Studies, and a priest of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Kyiv Patriarchate).

Professors Mytsyk and Yakovenko duelled in op-ed columns published by the Ukrainian analytical weekly *Dzerkalo tyzhnia*. Mytsyk started by providing counterarguments to each comment developed by the working group.¹⁶ He argued that the existing textbooks in Ukraine

¹⁵ *Propozytsii do kontseptsii istorichnoi osvity v Ukraini: Materialy III Robochoi narady z monitorynhu shkil'nykh pidruchnykiv istorii Ukraïny (Kyïv, 18 zhovtnia 2008 roku)*. (2009).

¹⁶ Iurii Mytsyk, "Nove chy pryzabute stare?" https://zn.ua/ukr/SOCIUM/nove_chi_pryzabute_stare.html

were not bad, and that the textbooks in Western countries that the group used as examples were very similar to the Ukrainian ones. Mytsyk also accused the group of twisting some facts to suit its conclusions. To this Yakovenko replied:

“My colleague accused us—a group of historians who, as initiated by the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory, analyzed textbooks on the history of Ukraine—of being “unscientific” and, perish the thought, of an attempt, “under the brand of best practices,” to revive the arsenal of “Communist Party ideologists” and “Russian and Polish great-power chauvinistic historiography.”

Professors Yakovenko and Mytsyk in fact share the same view on the importance of historical education as being *in the interests of the nation*. Yakovenko continued:

“The matter is too important from the perspective of the interests of the nation because, as Bismarck once reasonably remarked, the war between France and Prussia was won not so much by the Prussian army as by the Prussian history teacher. Ukraine, thank God, is not going to fight, but this does not diminish the [crucial] role of school history.”¹⁷

Both these historians come from two different *methodological* camps, which is reflected in how they view and approach history writing and interpretation of events of the past and their importance for society. But when it comes to the question of the function of history in society, they seem to have the same opinion on this issue but simultaneously differ on what society needs from history. Yakovenko argues that current history teaching needs to pay more attention to the variety of narratives. She explains that we should be discussing the history of Ukraine, not the history of Ukrainians. The ethnocentric approach is confusing and can have an unhealthy effect on the state of the society, especially for those parts of the society that find themselves not fitting within the common narratives of national history. She also translates her comments to academic writing:

Russia’s reaction to the discussion in Ukraine and other countries around history and memory politics at that time was to create a Commission Against the Falsification of History, established by the newly elected Russian President Dmitrii Medvedev in 2009. Because Vladimir Putin had reached the limit of two terms set in the Russian constitution, he could not run for re-election. But Dmitrii Medvedev continued Vladimir Putin’s course of actions in all domains, and memory

¹⁷ Natalya Yakovenko. “Likbez dlia profesora” https://zn.ua/SOCIUM/likbez_dlya_professora.html

politics was one of them. Putin, meanwhile, was appointed as Prime Minister to oversee that there was no detour from the prescribed course.

What is immediately striking is the membership of the commission. There were only two professional historians out of the twenty-eight people invited to serve on the commission. The rest were high-profile officials from different ministries and state departments, including representatives of the security services.¹⁸ The chair of the commission was Sergei Naryshkin, President Medvedev's Chief of Staff. The composition of the commission signalled its importance.

The reactions of professional historians in Russia to the creation of the commission were from mixed to very negative.¹⁹ They saw it as a sign of further deterioration of their position as professionals. They strongly condemned those of their colleagues who took on the commission's mandate too hastily and proceeded with some real actions even before the commission announced its purposes and functions. For example, immediately after the commission was created Valery Tishkov, deputy secretary of the Russian Academy of Sciences' Division of History and Philology, announced that all of its profile institutes had to compile lists of all known attempts of history falsification.²⁰

The fact itself that the commission was created planted an *anti-historian* mood in the minds of the general public. Professional historians were accused of doing nothing to prevent or fight the falsification of history. This narrative was promoted by different actors. The authors of the notorious school history textbooks were the most outspoken critiques of the inability of the professional historians to stand against the falsification of Russia's history.

One year before the commission was formed, several new school textbooks of history and supporting teaching and learning materials were introduced. Some of them were published with a very high print run. Those books are believed to have received state support. They were the most ordered by schools. By comparison, a publisher normally publishes around 5,000 textbooks, while a notorious textbook by Aleksandr Filipov was issued in 250,000 copies.²¹

¹⁸ Pål Kolstø "Dmitrii Medvedev's Commission Against the Falsification of History: Why Was It Created and What Did It Achieve? A Reassessment" *The Slavonic and East European Review* Vol 97, 4 (October 2019): 747.

¹⁹ «Nuzhna sovместnaia kropotlivaia rabota uchenykh, a ne chinovnye prikazy»
<https://polit.ru/article/2009/08/10/istorija/>

²⁰ A. Petrov "Ob azhiotazhe vokrug pisma Otdeleniya istoriko-filologicheskikh nauk RAN 'o falsifikatsiyakh istorii,'" <https://polit.ru/article/2009/07/03/petrov/>

²¹ Pål Kolstø "Dmitrii Medvedev's Commission Against the Falsification of History: Why Was It Created and What Did It Achieve? A Reassessment" *The Slavonic and East European Review* Vol. 97, No. 4 (October 2019): 739.

However, it was not the number of copies or the distribution preferences that earned those books their notoriety. The content inside the books sparked outrage from many professional historians both in Russia and abroad. The books rehabilitated Stalin's actions as being the only ones available and right for that time. The contemporary period of Russian history depicted Vladimir Putin as a successful leader of the Russian Federation, while Gorbachev and Yeltsin were depicted as being weak. The books also were full of misleading information that many historians regarded as an account of intentional falsification of history that in many cases also promoted retaliation.²²

But among those who produced such textbooks or chapters in them were professional historians as well. The most well-known was Aleksandr Danilov. In 2010 he was even nominated as a candidate for the position of director of the Institute of History of the Russian Academy of Science.²³ But his candidacy was protested as he earned the fame of "propagandist" by that time. In 2009, in defence of the creation of the Commission Against the Falsification of History, he blamed professional historians for not being ready to combat falsifications of history when amateur historians were doing it enthusiastically and better than the professionals.

"It is the amateur rather than the professional historians who have now broken into the publishing business, publishing books on a massive scale—which, in their treatment of events during the Stalin years, the Great Patriotic War, and the end of the tsarist era, are of a much higher quality than what the professionals have managed to produce. These amateurs and enthusiasts are Russia's main asset. It is they who are ready to devote their lives to defending our historical memory and combating falsification. And what response do we see from the official historians? Most often they respond with terrible petty jealousy, and at the academic level they respond by shifting to revisionist positions."²⁴

The Ukrainian Institute of National Memory was created with a domestic national agenda in mind, to foster the transition of the Ukrainian state and society to democracy by casting off the burdens of the Communist past and developing a new historical memory for internal consumption. In the case of Russia, the Commission Against the Falsification of History was

²² Irina Karatsuba ""Uchebnik Filippova": prodolzheniye posledovalo" *Uroki istorii XX vek* <https://urokiistorii.ru/article/596>

²³ V. Lavrov, I. Kurlyandskiy "Teper' budet, komu zanyat'sya fal'sifikatsiyey istorii! Direktorom Instituta rossiyskoy istorii RAN mozhet stat' A.A. Danilov, sozdatel' neostalinistskikh uchebnikov dlya shkol po istorii Rossii 20 veka." *Novaya Gazeta* <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2010/12/13/280-teper-budet-komu-zanyatsya-falsifikatsiyey-istorii>

²⁴ Alexei Miller "Russia: Power & History" in *Engaging History: The Problems & Politics of Memory in Russia and the Post-Socialist Space* (Edited V Samuel A. Greene), (2010): 22.

created as a counteraction with the intention of undermining and debunking neighboring countries' memory politics and instead promoting its versions of history. Those two different intentions and approaches are well contrasted in how the professional historians reacted and if they collaborated with those two initiatives.

In 2010, when Viktor Yushchenko was defeated by Viktor Yanukovich in the presidential election, the official memory politics in Ukraine shifted towards the Russian interpretation of events. The Ukrainian Institute of National Memory was eliminated and a new one was established in its place, with the same name but different status. It was a regular research institution now. Its new director became Valeriy Soldatenko, a professional historian. His appointment was not met enthusiastically by many colleague historians and protested by some of them. The main concerns were around his long membership in the Communist Party and accusations that he would serve some political agenda.²⁵ His views about the Holodomor also worried many historians. In this regard, a well-known historian of the Holodomor, Liudmyla Hrynevych, wrote:

“With all due respect to this scholar’s research work, I cannot help noticing that it was he who in 2003 [...] proposed a neo-Communist version of the interpretation of the Holodomor. In fact, he indirectly proposed the concept of justifying the Holodomor by the [Soviet] victory in World War II.”²⁶

In reality, the institute, being downgraded in status, was neither instrumentalized by the new political power nor produced any substantial research that could shift the general opinion or divert the views of professional historians during the time of Yanukovich’s presidency. Instead, the crucial role in reshaping historical memory was played by the Minister of Education and Science. Its head, Dmytro Tabachnyk, promoted the line of the Party of Regions concerning the interpretation of history. The interpretation of key events of Ukrainian history in many parts closely coincided with the official accounts of Russian memory politics. The legislative initiatives that came from other members of the Party of Regions on language and history contributed to the turmoil among the professional academics, including historians, and spilled out into the general public. Polarization grew rapidly, and numerous texts of historians appeared at that time. They debated the adequacy of the adopted official line and the attempts to promote it into law. That situation also contributed to the appearance of more detailed research about

²⁵ “Ne Holodomor, a holod: «tsya formula i na s’ohodnishniy den’ ye vypravdanoyu» – novyy dyrektor Instytutu natsional’noyi pam’yati Valeriy Soldatenko” *Radio Svoboda* <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/2106236.html>

²⁶ Dmytro Shurkhalo. “Polityku natsional’noï pam’iati vidkorehuiut’.” <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/2106932.html>

the key events of Ukrainian history, primarily in the 20th century. Many historians shaped their texts for the general public. The website publications for public consumption were issued at that time as well.

The interpretation of Ukrainian history by the Party of Regions and its leadership impacted the process of decision making in the national and international domain. Yanukovich's refusal to embark on a free trade agreement with the European Union and his turn to Russia's Customs Union can be interpreted as part of the historical framework of close ties between the two nations that was heavily promoted in those years.

The refusal to sign the agreement with Europe provoked democratic protests in Kyiv, which grew into Revolution of Dignity and resulted in Yanukovich's ouster after he tried to suppress demonstrations by employing force, causing the death of over one hundred people. The subsequent Russian occupation of Crimea and war in the Donbas region prompted the evaluation of history writing and the role of historians in societies, the memory politics of the states they belong to, and their function as professionals.

In Ukraine, the main notable change in history writing was that Crimea and Crimean Tatars received significantly more attention from historians than ever before. The number of scholarly events, books, and articles devoted to the history of Crimea grew significantly, and other minority groups have also gained attention. In this endeavour, the role of historians as public intellectuals became the subject of numerous inquiries and was scrutinized by both historians and experts in other professions.²⁷

In Russia, research about the history of Crimea also received a significant boost. While in Ukraine the initiatives came from the historians themselves, in Russia the research was mostly initiated by state agencies. There was also a difference in how that research was approached. In Ukraine the dominant research was on the Crimean Tatars and other populations on the peninsula. Meanwhile, in Russia the most attention went to the territory and how it was governed. In both countries, Russia's 1783 occupation of Crimea and its transfer to the jurisdiction of Ukraine in 1954 were the most discussed topics.

²⁷ Vitalii Nakhmanovych "Navishcho ukraintsiam istoryky?" *Istorychna Pravda*

<https://www.istpravda.com.ua/articles/2020/03/19/157209/>

Volodymyr Sklokin "Istoryky iak publichni intelektualy: vypadok postradianskoi Ukrainy" *Tsentr miskoi istorii, Lviv*

<https://www.lvivcenter.org/discussions/public-intellectuals-2/>; "Misiia istoryka v suchasnykh umovakh. U Kyievi

startuvav dvodennyi forum" *Ukrainskyi instytut natsionalnoi pamiati* [https://uinp.gov.ua/pres-](https://uinp.gov.ua/pres-centr/novyny/misiya-istoryka-v-suchasnyh-umovah-u-kyievi-startuvav-dvodennyi-forum)

[centr/novyny/misiya-istoryka-v-suchasnyh-umovah-u-kyievi-startuvav-dvodennyi-forum](https://uinp.gov.ua/pres-centr/novyny/misiya-istoryka-v-suchasnyh-umovah-u-kyievi-startuvav-dvodennyi-forum); "Istoryk Andrii Portnov:

"Istoryky ne duzhe nadaiutsia na rol prorokiv"" LB

https://lb.ua/culture/2021/03/10/479492_istorik_andriy_portnov_istoriki.htm |

The Ukrainian Institute of National Memory was reconstituted. Its chief new undertaking was decommunization reforms. The reforms and the new director of the institute, historian Volodymyr Viatrovyh, parried a wide range of reactions, from approval to criticism. Some of the criticism came from scholars at universities abroad, who produced a letter to the President of Ukraine and the head of parliament, with demand do not approve the laws.²⁸ The main concerns in the legislation case were the possible complications for academic freedom. There were also well-known Western scholars who saw the reforms as a positive movement, albeit delayed in time.²⁹

In Ukraine, criticism was also present, but the debates dominated over procedural details and theoretical problems of decommunization as a remedy to society's historical problems. For example, the well-known historian Yaroslav Hrytsak did not oppose decommunization as an idea, but his ideal solution to the historical memory problem in Ukraine was much needed economic reforms³⁰. While another well-known historian, Heorhii Kasianov, opposed the whole concept of decommunization reform as a mere exercise in memory politics, citing different complications of the reform for academia and society³¹.

Historians in the regions actively engaged in the process of name changes for toponymic entities that were carried out by local committees. They participated in hearings that were tasked with the renaming of streets and other geographical objects, providing their expertise in local history and petitioning in cases when historically inaccurate names were proposed in their area. A good example is Zaporizhia. There, thanks to the active participation of historians, new street names that were introduced reflected the diverse nature of the city and the region. For instance, thoughtfully placed new street names within the boundaries of Zaporizhia city reflect past Mennonite and Jewish colonis.

Meanwhile, memory politics in Russia were intensively implemented at that time by the Ministry of Culture under the leadership of Vladimir Medinsky, a historian who was the minister from 2012 to 2020. Medinsky's academic credentials are suspect, with proven plagiarism in his doctoral dissertation and numerous other concerns.³² His work was also

²⁸ David R. Marples "Open Letter from Scholars and Experts on Ukraine Re. the So-Called "Anti-Communist Law" Krytyka <https://krytyka.com/en/articles/open-letter-scholars-and-experts-ukraine-re-so-called-anti-communist-law>

²⁹ Alexander J. Motyl "Kiev's Purge: Behind the New Legislation to Decommunize Ukraine" *Foreign Affairs* <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2015-04-28/kiivs-purge>

³⁰ Yaroslav Hrytsak "Pro dekomunizatsiiu" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LNIQAdMfRsk>

³¹ Heorhii Kasianov "Dekomunizatsiia chy mistyfikatsiia? Dosvid Ukrainy ta krain Tsentralno-Skhidnoi levropy" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I3FOx3qI800>

³² "Piat faktov o skandalnoi dySSERTatsyy Medynskoho" *DW* <https://www.dw.com/ru/%D0%BF%D1%8F%D1%82%D1%8C-%D1%84%D0%B0%D0%BA%D1%82%D0%BE%D0%B2-%D0%BE-%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B4%D0%B0%D0%BB%D1%8C%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B9-%D0%B4%D0%B8%D1%81%D1%81%D0%B5%D1%80%D1%82%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B8%D0%B8-%D0%BC%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%B3%D0%BE/a-41028352>

evaluated as being ideologically charged, which is viewed as unacceptable for academic writing.

Medinsky's views on history are well described in the following passage from his book on "national PR, the true history of Russia from Rurik to Peter" (*Osobennosti natsional'nogo piara: Pravdivaia istoriia Rusi ot Riurika do Petra*).

Right before our eyes [history] is being once more used as an instrument. It happens that people rape history. It also happens that history rapes people. In the present case, people are being raped with history. And everyone knows what it is all about: it has nothing to do with the discipline [of scholarship] or restoring the truth, but with current politics.³³

Medinsky claimed that "if historical research can advance the national interest [...] then substituting a work of fiction for history makes perfect sense."³⁴

Medinsky is also president of the state-funded Russian Military Historical Society,³⁵ and after the dissolution of the Commission Against the Falsification of History, the above-mentioned Sergei Naryshkin was appointed as president of the Russian Historical Society.³⁶ In 2016 Naryshkin also became director of the Foreign Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation. Both organizations were created by Vladimir Putin in 2012, and since then they have played a significant role in shaping the memory politics in Russia—using state funds.

In 2014 the main ideas of Russian memory politics were affixed in the Law "Against the Rehabilitation of Nazism." The law introduced criminal liability for denying or approving the war crimes committed in Europe by Nazi Germany and its collaborators, but the main emphasis was on condemning the spread of disinformation or diminishing the role of the Soviet Union in the WWII victory. The promulgation of the law spelled serious trouble for freedom of speech and other freedoms in Russia. There are numerous instances of this law being applied. For example, the most reported case is when the Russian blogger Vladimir Luzgin was convicted for stating that both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union invaded Poland in 1939.³⁷

The introduction of the memory law coincided with the implementation of several other laws that contributed to the further deterioration of democratic freedoms in Russia. For example, telecommunications and internet companies are now required to store the data from all

³³ Anton Weiss-Wendt *Putin's Russia and the Falsification of History: Reasserting Control Over the Past* (2020)

³⁴ Anton Weiss-Wendt *Putin's Russia and the Falsification of History: Reasserting Control Over the Past* (2020)

³⁵ Rossiiskoe voenno-istoricheskoe obshchestvo <https://rvio.histrf.ru/officially/predsedatel-rvio>

³⁶ Russkoe istoricheskoe obshchestvo <https://historyrussia.org/sergey-naryshkin/biografiya.html>

³⁷ Halya Coynash "Blogger fined for saying the USSR invaded Poland in 1939 takes Russia to Court in Strasbourg" *Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group* <http://khpg.org/en/1488552228>

communication activities for up to 6 years and yield this information to state agencies if they request it.³⁸

To summarize the 30 years of development of the status of professional historians and memory politics in Ukrainian and Russia, the main observations that come to the fore include how professional historians cooperated with various forces and governments, how they reacted to the enforcement of memory policy in their respective states, and how those states treated professional historians trying to do their job. In Russia, reputable professional historians were artificially distanced from state memory politics. They were initially treated as part of the old ideological system. Then, as Russia evolved, historians were accused of not being sufficiently helpful in fighting attempts by neighbouring countries (particularly Ukraine) and the West to falsify Russian history. The memory policy is being implemented by functionaries with little or no historical education, making the system very similar to the Soviet one.

In Ukraine, we see the opposite situation, with the role of professional historians being strengthened since Ukraine gained independence. Professional historians in Ukraine can more openly initiate, cooperate, and also criticize or oppose official state memory policy. These discussions are also balanced by openness to different views, which are equally presented in all professional forums and the media, making the process more democratic in nature.

³⁸ "Online and On All Fronts Russia's Assault on Freedom of Expression" Human Rights Watch
<https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/07/18/online-and-all-fronts/russias-assault-freedom-expression>