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BETWEEN THE POLITICS OF HISTORY AND PRACTICE: UKRAINIAN STRUGGLES WITH THE PAST

THE EXAMPLE OF THE PERMANENT EXHIBITION OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE HISTORY OF UKRAINE IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Abstract
In 2015, as a result of implementing the Ukrainian decommunisation laws, the official name of the Museum of the Great Patriotic War was changed to the National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War. The current exhibition at the museum depicts internalisation of Soviet myths in Ukraine as well as the problem of no explicit guidelines from state authorities regarding an official narrative. Also, developing a new concept of a museum dedicated to the history of Ukraine in the Second World War has been impeded by the ongoing war in the eastern part of the country. This paper discusses mutual relations and mismatches between Ukraine's politics of history and museum practices. The change of the latter is much more languid and complex than in the case of merely changing street names or dismantling old monuments and erecting new ones.

Keywords: decommunisation, Second World War, Great Patriotic War, politics of memory, museums in Ukraine

A poll conducted jointly by the Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences and Collegium Civitas university at the beginning of 2018 found that 34% of Ukrainian respondents cited museums as sources of knowledge about the past. Also, 36% of respondents saw museum exhibitions as a fully reliable source of historical information. Much greater confidence is inspired only by memories of family members – the witness of history. Academics and history teachers are considered less influential authority figures. (Konieczna-Sałamatin, Stryjek, and Otrishchenko 2018, pp. 29–30). Meanwhile, the issue of exhibitions and changes in narratives in Ukrainian historical museums has itself had little attention even in Ukraine. Analyses referring to politics of memory are to a large extent restricted to the legal aspects and commemorative practices as well as the official discourse and activities performed by central institutions, with the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance at the forefront (Kas'yanov 2016; Riabczuk 2015; Shevel 2014; see Decision No. 927 of July 5, 2006). Many publications are written about new ideas on recording communist crimes and the Soviet past (Kharkhun 2014) as well as the decommunisation process in urban spaces, encompassing the changing of both street names and monuments. Also, more and more papers about sites of memory are currently being published (Zhurzhenko 2015b). The Polish public discourse refers to Ukraine mostly in the context of bilateral ties between the two countries, disputes over the interpretation of past as well as declarations and activities of the aforementioned Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance. All these topics have dominated the public debate while significantly narrowing the scope of the analysis of both mechanisms and tools for shaping perception of the past among members of Ukrainian society.

When discussing Polish-Ukrainian relations during the war and debating the main aims of the museum of the Second World War in Poland, we should refer to the exhibition of the National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War, the country's most extensive museum collection dedicated to this period. This article makes an attempt to depict declarations regarding both the concept and the mission of the Museum while discussing the current state of the permanent exhibition and enriching knowledge on the tools used by Ukraine to shape its collective memory.

The analysis will mainly contain examples of how the declared goals of the Ukrainian politics of history were either put into effect or temporarily prevented from being implemented. Such activities remain within the competence of the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine, to which the Museum is subject.

This paper is a result of three visits paid to the Museum from 2016 to 2018, and refers to publications available on *Prostir.muzeum*, a website devoted to the Ukrainian museum sector, and texts by Ukrainian historians conducting research in the politics of history and collective memory. Also, attention was drawn to all descriptions and captions that are part of the exhibition, along with museum publications or research on memory in Ukraine. Furthermore, the paper quotes the aforementioned report compiled jointly by the Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences and Collegium Civitas university. Lastly, I also included information gathered during interviews conducted with museum staff. While drafting the following publication, I expressed an interest in all matters regarding new museum trends along with innovative techniques and methods of arranging exhibitions (Heesen 2016; Ziębińska-Witek 2014).

Notably, the route linking the Arsenalna metro station with the Museum is full of sites of memory created in the symbolic heart of old Kyiv in various historical periods and linked to distinct contexts (Zhurzhenko 2015a). A juxtaposition of all these messages has ultimately assembled an eclectic collection. It includes the Memorial of Eternal Glory – the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier (opened in 1957), with dates referring to the Great Patriotic War, to which adjacent are the Memorial to Holodomor Victims, the Pechersk Lavra and the Afghanistan 1979–1989 War Memorial to commemorate Ukrainian soldiers who died fighting in Afghanistan. All buildings of the National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War were erected close to the remains of the 18th-century Pechersk fortress, owing their architectural concept to Yevhen Vuchetich, a Dnipropetrovsk-born (today Dnipro) artist and prominent designer of post-war Soviet sites of memory, including those of Treptower Park in Berlin and in Volgograd. Until 1947, the Museum had been located in the Klov Palace, from where it was then moved to new premises and officially inaugurated on May 9, 1981. Before 2015, the Museum had been officially

known as the Museum of the Great Patriotic War. Above the building stands the 60-meter-high Motherland Monument, also designed by Vuchetich, raising the notion of controversy as an example of monumental aesthetics and symbolic of the Soviet era (Yekel'chyk 2016; V'yatrovych 2016).

The museum exhibition was first changed between 1992 and 1995, when its employees began collecting both materials and artefacts linked to the Holodomor (Great Famine), German-Soviet cooperation between 1939 and 1941, Stalinist repressions, prisoners of war and deportation of the Crimean Tatars, as part of an undertaking aimed at filling in the 'blank spots' in Ukrainian history. According to the museum's management, attempts were also made to exert "political pressure" aimed at preventing facts about the OUN-UPA's clandestine activities from being presented (*Z pryvodu* 2015). Apart from the period mentioned above, no further changes were introduced to the museum's permanent exhibition while the institution's activities rarely go beyond publishing initiatives and displaying temporary exhibitions.

On July 16, 2015, under Decision No. 494 by the Minister of Culture of Ukraine Vyacheslav Kyrylenko, the museum's official name was changed to the National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War as part of the Ukrainian decommunisation laws. Earlier, polls had been carried out from October 2014 to April 2015, followed by public consultations held on June 12, 2015. Out of the 500 people, including 130 military history researchers, who took part in the debate, 59% of respondents were in favour of the current name of the museum (*Z pryvodu* 2015). Once adopted, the decision did not entail any personnel reshuffles; on November 29, 2016, Ivan Kovalchuk, who had served as the acting director of the institution since 2010, was appointed head of the National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War (Yefimova 2016). As officially informed by the museum's management, media reports claiming that the decision to change the museum's name begun in fact the decommunisation process, had been considered "unfair" by its staff. Also, emphasis that it has continued uninterrupted since the late 1980s, and joint efforts have been undertaken by employees to revise the Soviet past and the experiences of Ukrainian residents of the Second World War (*Z pryvodu* 2015).

On the right:
Mother Motherland Statue in Kyiv (Yevgeniy Vuchetich, unveiled in 1981); Statue of Dnieper river crossing in the foreground (Fridrih Sogoyan, Al'bert Avetisyan, 1981). Kyiv, Ukraine. 2018.
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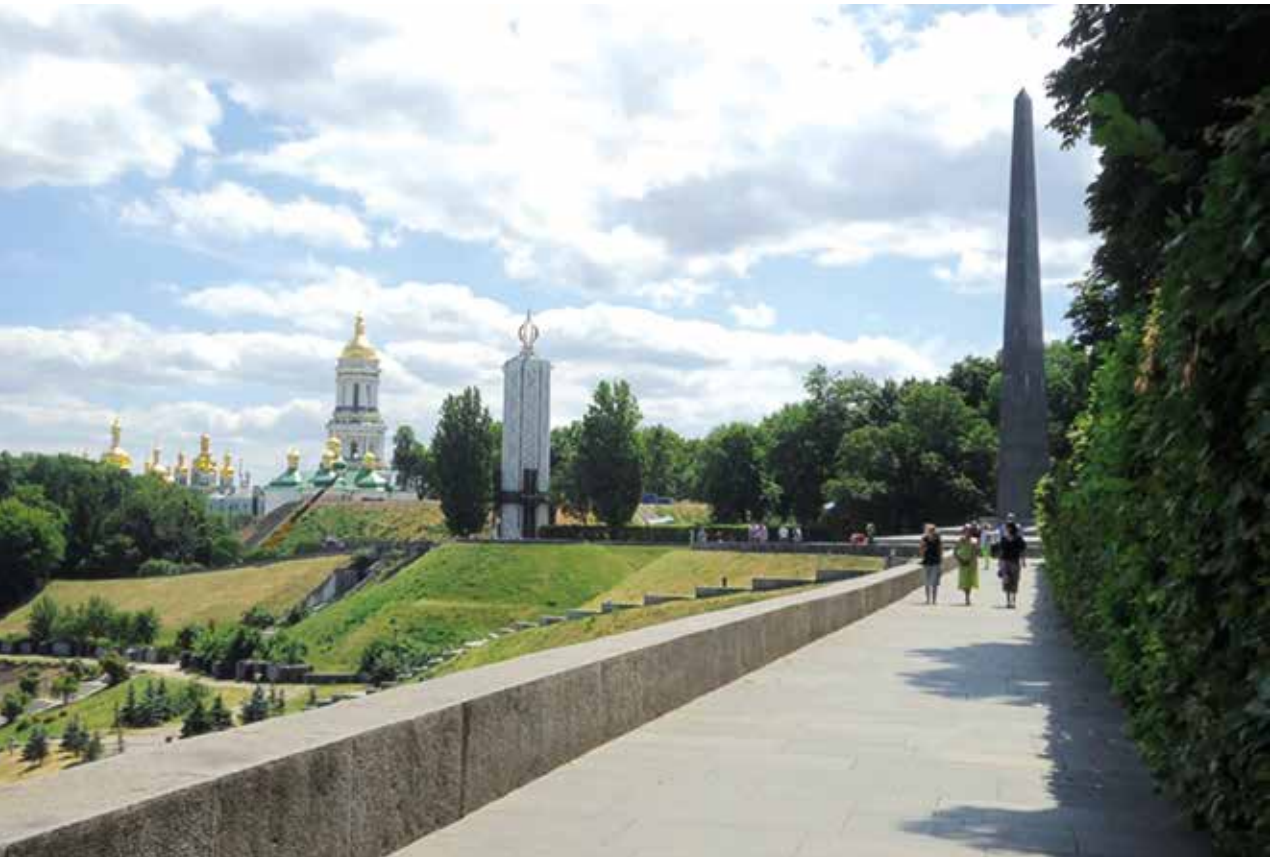
In 2015, in addition to changing the museum's name, the institution's management made a declaration to develop a completely new concept of a permanent exhibition covering themes that had not yet been adequately exposed. Among them were mainly those that concerned the daily life of the civilian population, the Ukrainian national movement, genocide of the Roma, deportation of the Crimean Tatars, mass resettlements in 1944–1947 and the famine of 1946–1947. Also, attention was paid to the need to update the form of exhibition (Ministry of Culture Communique 2016). During a discussion on the present-day challenges for the Ukrainian museum sector, held on International Museum Day in 2017 in the Ukraine Crisis Media Center, Ivan Kovalchuk said that it is vital to alter both the narrative of the events shown in the museum along with their subsequent interpretation (*Suchasni* 2017).

And yet, facing the situation in eastern Ukraine, it is problematic to highlight the tragedy of war in line with the *Never Again* idea, promoted during the debate by Linda Norris, Global Networks Program Director at the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience (*Suchasni* 2017). Thus, what is conveyed through the museum's exhibition is much more



Road to the National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War: Pechersk Lavra (17th century), Monument and Museum of the Holodomor-Genocide (Anatoliy Haydamaka, 2008), Monument to Eternal Glory at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier (Avraam Miletskiy, V. Baklanov, L. Novikov, Ivan Perdushchev, 1957). Kyiv, Ukraine. 2018.

pessimistic. An English-language caption informs visitors that "unfortunately, mankind did not learn the lessons of the Second World War whose consequences are still visible today". The main thrust of the permanent exhibition, whose initial and final components tell the story of the war in eastern Ukraine, remains closer to the concept of war as an eternally recurring evil.

According to official reports, the museum attracts about 650,000 visitors a year. In total, up to 15,000 artefacts are displayed in 16 rooms of the exhibition space covering 5,000 m² (*Nacional'nyy* 2017; *Memorial'nyy* 2004). The museum collection emerges as a symbolic representation of ongoing changes. Back in 2012, Georgiy Kas'yanov discussed a consensus between nationalised historiography and the ideological discourse of the state (Kas'yanov 2012, p. 160). Even a few years after the landmark changes in 2015, the museum's permanent display resembles a ceasefire in a constant state of anticipation rather than consensus over the interpretation of the past. Some of its elements are to be seen as an example of adapting the Soviet-era narrative yet with shifting accents. This attitude was particularly emphasized by Andriy Portnov (Portnov 2013, p. 174).

What is challenging is to provide the reception of all parts and narrative layers of the display, as well as to deconstruct its overall message. Information is available currently only in English and German, obliging Ukrainian- and Russian-speaking visitors either to consult the guide or to discover the collection themselves, though the latter solution may result in some technical difficulties, including the illegibility of such artefacts as letters, memories or documents. A memoir dating back to the occupation of Kyiv can serve here as an example. Except for the very existence of the memoir, visitors will, however, learn nothing about its content. In the 'new museology' approach, the artefacts appear to encourage reflection or serve as a point of reference for addressing specific issues. However, in Kyiv's Museum the artefacts are exhibited rather as holy relics. Even Ukrainian visitors may find it demanding to grasp the essence of the collection, which is due to the constant changes in history textbooks or a generation gap that contributes to distinct receptions of historical representations.

The first room of the exhibition created in the aftermath of changes introduced back in the 1990s, proves a considerable challenge to decode the narrative shown in the museum. Its description reads as efforts made to portray the political situation in Europe in the 1930s and as the pursuits of "some nations" (!) to review the Treaty of Versailles. Also, the room is the only one to draw parallels between the two totalitarian regimes as forces that actively sought to put their policy into action in 1939. Although depicted contrary to the Soviet myth of 'liberation', the occupation of the then Polish regions of Eastern Galicia and Volhynia as a result of a secret agreement concluded between the two totalitarian states in September 1939 may be interpreted in terms of a longed-for unification of divided Ukrainian lands. The display shows a photo of a Ukrainian village school near the city of Stanyslaviv (today Ivano-Frankivsk), opened in 1939, apparently after the Red Army entered the territory. Such approach complies with one of Halyna Denysenko, a former museum employee, articles (Gorbyk and Denysenko 2004, pp. 374–375). The part of exhibition concerning period between 1939 and 1941 still seems to be only 'added' to the main body of the display (that refers to the times of the Great Patriotic War).

The current pattern of the exhibition highlights the dangers resulting from its partial change as well as the problem of the internalisation of Soviet myths, mainly established under Brezhnev's rule and then perpetuated in mass consciousness. The museum relies to a great extent on artefacts that had been both gathered and exhibited since Soviet times. Elements of national discourse have expanded the collection, as a result of which Mykola Riabchuk has labelled it as 'eclectic' or dangerously 'post-modern', saying it devaluated Ukrainian historical policy (Riabczuk 2015, pp. 133–134). It appears somewhat risky to provide no proper comment on the exhibition of artefacts which, although original served as a tool for propaganda, while hoping that visitors will make an effort to deconstruct the conveyed message. In consequence, they may instead feel disoriented and overwhelmed by the surrounding cacophony of multiple symbols.

The Soviet aesthetics of the museum building can be referred to as monumental, as illustrated by the metal hammer and sickle on the front door, the enormous relief showing the defence

National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War – interiors. Kyiv, Ukraine. 2018. © Olga Gontarska

of Sevastopol, designed by Anatoliy and Serhiy Bilostotski, and the large wall lamps decorated with five-pointed stars. Its grandiose setting serves as a background to present the history of the Ukrainian soldiers of the Red Army and civilians struggling against the German occupier. Under a dominant narrative, Ukraine's history during the Second World War was particularly marked by the siege of Leningrad whose illustrations were the paintings by Maksim Lipkin, a Warsaw-born theatre creator who settled in Kyiv after the war.

Moreover, the narrative covers all those who fought beyond the Arctic Circle, as well as children adopted by a family living in Central Asia after the evacuation. Elsewhere, Soviet troops are portrayed as liberators, as illustrated by a photo of a soldier carrying a child in his arms, and by a picture that lacked an extended commentary yet showed a 'rally of gratitude' after the 'liberation' of Lviv in 1944, as the city had earlier been taken over by the Red Army.

The idea of keeping the exhibition in its current form could potentially be rationalised if the collection was transformed into a 'museum of the museum' itself and used as a tool for exemplifying how to deconstruct a historical narrative. This, however, goes far beyond the assumption of both the museum's management and the research department. These

National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War – interiors. Kyiv, Ukraine. 2018. © Olga Gontarska

elements were preserved while 'supplemented' with artefacts related to the Ukrainian national underground yet chosen in a 'safe' and selective manner. In the room dedicated to the anti-German guerrilla, attention was drawn to the Soviet partisans and those of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (*Ukrayins'ka Povstans'ka Armiya*, UPA), both of whom are displayed in different parts of the room. Those two parallel stories never intersect in the museum.

In an attempt to show distinct fates and divisions provoked by the war, the museum's management installed a new display case devoted to members of a family who fought in different armed formations, including the Polish Army during the 1939 September Campaign, the Red Army and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army. This might have emerged as a response to a rhetorical question about whether it is possible to present several distinct viewpoints within the same exhibition, asked by Anastasia Khaydukevich, the head of the Department of Museums of the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance (*Suchasni* 2017).

Interestingly enough, the exhibition also contains information about Ukrainian state distinctions awarded to Red Army soldiers whose profiles are presented in the display. The awards justify their presence as a fully recognised heritage of independent Ukraine, and not as part of the Soviet narrative. Also, Ukraine's decommunisation laws do not encompass the heroes of war.

Facing huge disproportions between the dominant historical discourse on the army and armed formations, one might also wonder whether issues that were either omitted from the exhibition or were lacking there from simply did not fit into a military narrative. Neither the aforementioned declaration nor the collection itself can be restricted to only military history. The display also shows elements of everyday life and specific issues related to civilians. Any shortages are said to result from the 'unavailability of relevant original artefacts'. The artefacts are usually accompanied by brief captions containing only the most essential facts. The collection may also serve as the basis for carrying out an independent study, followed by own interpretation, however, the set of the artefacts ultimately encourages specified ideas.

Apart from the information about the racist elements of Nazi ideology, a separate museum space dedicated to extermination or photos taken after a massacre in Babi Yar, the term 'Holocaust' can be read only in English- and German-language descriptions displayed in one of the rooms. The collection amasses pictures of the Jews rescued by Ukrainian families yet does not present the fate of the Jewish Ukrainian community; similarly, nothing is said about the extermination of Roma, though the exhibition shows carpentry tools that had belonged to such victims. Also, the display does not present any reasons for the course of the deportation of the Crimean Tatars. A cabinet shows only a photo of Amet-khan Sultan, a Crimean Tatar flying ace awarded with the title of Hero of the Soviet Union who personally witnessed the deportation of his nation, along with a fragment of Ramzan Izmailov's memoir without any commentary provided. Many topics related to civilians, historical figures and political events are passed over in silence: the exhibition does not mention such issues as collaboration with Germany, violence against women, the Yalta Conference or any matters having links to Polish-Ukrainian relations. No information is provided about the massacres of Poles in Volhynia in 1943, either. Interestingly, the collection presents the figure of Yevhen Konovalets, a political leader of the Ukrainian nationalist movement assassinated by an NKVD agent before the Second World War started, along with a comment on his anti-Polish activity dating back to the interwar period. Also, a caption about the activity of Stepan Bandera was reduced to a minimum.

National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War – interiors. Kyiv, Ukraine. 2018. © Olga Gontarska

In light of the challenges as mentioned earlier related to the exhibition's content, it is problematic to launch a discussion about new museology or a need to enrich the display with interactive content. Led by Lubov Legasova, the scientific department of the museum is seeking a brand-new concept for further undertakings. The permanent exhibition relies upon well-known schemes typical for traditional museology that involve collecting artefacts, publishing scientific publications and carrying out source and restoration activities (Legasova 2018).

The museum hosts several temporary exhibitions dedicated to the above-mentioned themes that have been absent from the permanent display. In terms of their content and format,

they resemble an experimental laboratory and are often incorporated into the permanent collection. Opened in the summer of 2018, the display dedicated to the Greek Catholic Church temporarily replaced the permanent exposition concerning post-war repression and Ukrainian rebellions in Soviet labour camps. Due to their time-sensitive nature, these exhibitions can hardly be referred to as a part of a consistent and long-term historical policy whose undertakings are aimed at shaping the memory of the Second World War. Under the present-day situation, it is difficult to assess how the Ministry of Culture and the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance will share their competences in the field of hosting a new permanent exhibition. Furthermore, this division has not been specified as for a new emerging museum such as the Maidan Museum, which is subject to the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance, all financial decisions remain within the competence of the ministries of Culture and Finance (see Decree No. 1186-r of November 18, 2015; Decision No. 927 of July 5, 2006).

As reads the joint report of the Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences and Collegium Civitas university, *Ukraine's current situation resembles that of an 'unfinished past'* (Konieczna-Sałamatin, Stryjek, and Otrishchenko 2018, p. 29). Along with some other state institutions, the National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War is awaiting further developments. In Ukraine, there is a chasm between an officially declared line of historical policy and actual undertakings in the field of historical culture. This does not allow for assessing the final direction, the scope of changes, and the division of competences within individual institutions.

Regardless of the official political message disseminated by state authorities far beyond the country's borders, Ukraine's historical past is still being negotiated. Ukraine's decommunisation process, or that of modifying its historical narrative in the national museum sector, develops in a far more complex and languid way than in the case of merely changing names of streets or monuments. This entails indispensable financial outlays and is connected to the lack of clear guidelines from entitled institutions about how to produce a new official narrative.

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