

*Tomasz Stryjek*

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9137-7537>  
Institute of Political Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences

*Barbara Markowska-Marczak*

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9824-0453>  
Institute of Sociology, Collegium Civitas

*Joanna Konieczna-Salamatin*

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7675-5440>  
Faculty of Sociology, University of Warsaw

**THIRD WAR OF INDEPENDENCE?  
THE ANTI-COLONIAL DYNAMICS OF UKRAINE'S  
POLITICS OF MEMORY AFTER 2014 ON THE EXAMPLE  
OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE HISTORY OF  
UKRAINE IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR IN KYIV**

**Abstract**

The article discusses the transformation of Ukraine from a peripheral colony to a European nation-state. It examines changes in the interpretation of Ukrainian-Russian relations in historiography, public perceptions, and museum exhibitions related to the ongoing war. It demonstrates that since 24 February 2022, Ukraine's politics of memory has exclusively followed a continuously expanding anti-colonial perspective. The article highlights a shift in Ukrainian society's view of its past, with growing interest in the country's history and a move away from the Soviet perspective. Museums are crucial in shaping these narrative changes and fostering Ukrainian national identity. The article also explores societal transformations since 1991, showing an increased identification with the state and a gradual distancing from Russia. This is accompanied by a westward turn in geopolitical orientation and a desire to join the European Union. The National Museum of History of Ukraine in the Second World War in Kyiv serves as an example of these processes, reflecting a nuanced portrayal of the war and of its human dimension. The museum's commitment can be seen as a pillar of a nation-state building project, with symbolic identification shifting from the East to the West, towards the EU and NATO.

**Keywords:** historiography, Ukrainian politics of memory, anti-colonialism, National Museum of History of Ukraine in the Second World War

An announcement published on the website of the National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War in late 2022 proclaims:

Ukraine's current struggle is a continuation of the national liberation movement, the struggle for independence, and state-building processes that took place throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries and were inextricably linked with the First and Second World Wars. Today's war is the apogee of the confrontation of the Ukrainian people with Soviet and Russian imperialism and colonialism.<sup>1</sup>

In our exchange with the Museum's management on 1 May 2023, we were informed of their intention to transform the institution into the National Memorial-Museum of the War of Independence [Національний Меморіал – Музей війни за Незалежність].<sup>2</sup> This vision for the expansion of the Museum's narrative is based on the belief that the Russo-Ukrainian war that began in 2014 deserves to be called the Third Ukrainian Independence War – a follow-up to two previous conflicts that began in July 1914 and September 1939.<sup>3</sup> To elaborate on these analogies, let us add that during the Second World War, the campaign that decided the fate of Ukraine also did not take place at the beginning of the conflict. It only started in June 1941 with the invasion of the USSR by the Third Reich. Previous activities since 1939 did not concern the core of the country, but mostly its western peripheries, particularly territories which had

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<sup>1</sup> 'Переозначення', Національний музей історії України у Другій світовій війні, [https://warmuseum.kyiv.ua/\\_ua/\\_other\\_projects/pereoznachennya/](https://warmuseum.kyiv.ua/_ua/_other_projects/pereoznachennya/) [Accessed: 1 May 2023] (authors' translation).

<sup>2</sup> This would be the second renaming of this institution, founded and opened during the Brezhnev era as one of a handful of institutions in Eastern Europe (next to those in Moscow and Minsk) commemorating the Great Patriotic War. The first renaming took place in 2015, after the passing of the de-communisation and de-Sovietisation laws, the name being changed from 'Museum of the Great Patriotic War' to 'National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War'.

<sup>3</sup> See George W. Liber, *Total Wars and the Making of Modern Ukraine, 1914–1954* (Toronto–Buffalo–London, 2016).

belonged to Poland in the interwar period and were annexed by the USSR at the beginning of the Second World War. The same has been the case in the current war, which began in March 2014, with the occupation of southern and eastern peripheries of Ukraine – the Crimea and parts of the Donbas – only reaching the heart of the country in winter and spring of 2022. However, crucially, in contrast to the two previous wars, during the current war of independence, Ukrainian society showed unity and received backing from the West. What seems assured is the preservation of the country's independence, and the only uncertainty is whether it shall maintain its territorial integrity. In the case of a victory, we can expect a marked increase in the sense of agency throughout Ukrainian society, which in its history has had few experiences of sovereignty and effective collective action.

This article aims to demonstrate that, while Ukraine's politics of memory in the years 2014–22 had both anti-colonial and postcolonial resonance, only the former tendency persisted after 24 February 2022 and is being intensely developed. We present the relevant change in the interpretation of the history of Ukrainian-Russian relations in historiography, public perceptions, and museum exhibitions concerning the current war. The introductory part of the article is concerned with the terminology and provides a historical introduction to the subsequent sections, in which we concentrate on the changes in the main exhibition in the National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War in Kyiv in the years 2014–22 as well as since the full-scale invasion until spring 2023.<sup>4</sup>

Three years after the Revolution of Dignity and the breakout of the war in 2014, Barbara Törnquist-Plewa and Yuliya Yurchuk described Ukraine's politics of memory at that stage as simultaneously postcolonial and anti-colonial.<sup>5</sup> They used postcolonial theory to demonstrate the presence of an ambivalence typical for postcolonial heritage.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This analysis is based on data collected during a research visit in June 2021, funded by NCN, grant no. 2020/04/X/HS3/00555, 'Images of the Past in World War II Narratives. A Pilot Study of Three Museums (Kiev–Berlin–Moscow) in the Context of Changes in Eastern Europe's Cultural Memory Field', and during a study visit in Kyiv in May 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Törnquist-Plewa and Yulia Yurchuk, 'Memory Politics in Contemporary Ukraine: Reflections from the Postcolonial Perspective', *Memory Studies*, xii, 6 (2017), 699–720, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698017727806> [Accessed: 7 Nov. 2023].

<sup>6</sup> Lea Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh, 1998), 5.

On the one hand, they pointed out examples of “anticolonial and nationalist models of remembering”, such as the usage of the figure of the Cossack, as well as of the symbolism of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists [Orhanizatsiya ukrayins'kykh natsionalistiv, OUN] and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army [Ukrayins'ka Povstans'ka Armiia, UPA], in the revolution, the nationalist tendencies of the volunteer battalions, and the decommunisation legislation of 2015, which separated the Second World War-era ethos of Ukrainian and Soviet (currently Russian) nationalists. On the other hand, they indicated “expressions of new subjectivity, transculturality and ‘hybridity’”, such as the opposition of intellectuals to the introduction of criminal sanctions for displaying communist symbols or the establishment of a new holiday, the Day of Memory and Reconciliation (2015) modelled on the celebrations in EU countries on 8 May, without abolishing the post-Soviet Day of Victory over Nazism occurring on 9 May. Following Homi Bhabha, Törnquist-Plewa, and Yurchuk claim that in postcolonial societies, the divide between the colonised and the colonists “should be bridged by a ‘third space’ of communication, negotiation and translation”.<sup>7</sup> The authors conclude that celebrating those two holidays back-to-back is a form of constructing a ‘place of hybridity’, which is, by its nature, opposed to both essentialisms – nationalism (anti-colonialism) and Sovietism (colonialism). However, in their view, the full formation of a transcultural identity in Ukraine is obstructed by two things: the refusal of the old coloniser to participate in its cultivation and the continuous failure of the West, which had acknowledged that the country belongs in Russia’s sphere of influence, to treat Ukraine as an autonomous subject.

We believe that both of these obstacles have shifted fundamentally after 24 February 2022: the West showed unequivocal support for Ukraine, while Russia lost influence on Ukrainian identity. Its failure to take responsibility for the colonial legacy of the Russian Empire and the USSR justified the lack of care for the symbols of their past presence in the public space. In Ukraine’s politics of memory, there is no more room for manifestations of post-coloniality. No longer just decommunisation, but also firm de-Russification and decolonisation have proceeded in public spaces, initiated by societal actors and the

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<sup>7</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York–London, 1994), 25.

government, which provided the legal framework.<sup>8</sup> An anti-colonial narrative underpinning the demand for independence has utterly saturated the public sphere. It is nationalist but overwhelmingly stresses civic values rather than ethnic nationalism. This is documented by the exhibition 'Azovstal: New Meanings', dedicated to the soldiers of the 'Azov' volunteer regiment who died defending the "Azovstal" metallurgical complex in Mariupol in the spring of 2022, displayed from 24 February 2023 at the National Museum of the History of Ukraine in Kyiv. The regiment formed out of one of several similar groups that participated in the Euromaidan (2013–14), has its roots in youth movements of the extreme right.<sup>9</sup> However, today, members of the regiment declare a commitment to civic values, and those who died or were taken prisoner have become a symbol of steadfastness and dedication to defending Ukraine.<sup>10</sup>

Looking at Ukraine from a long-term, historical perspective, we noticed that in the first year since the invasion Ukraine has rejected contemporary Russia as Putin's state and removed its symbols as remnants of a colonial relation. A time may come once more for the kind of politics of memory advocated by Bhabha, but only when Russia, too, becomes a democratic nation-state, reviews and reinterprets its

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<sup>8</sup> For more on these concepts on the example of relevant memory sites in Kyiv in 2022, see: Olena Betlii, 'The Identity Politics of Heritage. Decommunization, Decolonization and Derussification of Kyiv Monuments after Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine', *Journal of Applied History*, 4 (2022), 149–69. Meanwhile, with regards to the territories currently occupied by Russia, state and local governments have adopted a policy of 'cultural de-occupation', meaning that in the event of their liberation, they will remove not only symbols of Russia's presence that existed before 2022 but also new ones that have been introduced by the occupiers.

<sup>9</sup> Per Anders Rudling, 'The Return of the Ukrainian Far Right. The Case of VO Svoboda', in Ruth Wodak and John E. Richardson (eds), *Analysing Fascist Discourse: European Fascism in Talk and Text* (London–New York, 2013), 228–55.

<sup>10</sup> Despite the presence of many sites commemorating wars in Kyiv, the fact that two major historical museums closed their main exhibitions and arranged temporary exhibitions dedicated to the current war is very significant. This circumstance was noticed by Western public opinion: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/apr/22/curating-the-war-kyiv-ukraine-museum-exhibits-objects-left-by-russian-soldiers>. The National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War received a special prize in the 2023 Museum+Heritage Awards for the exhibition *Ukraine–Crucifixion*: <https://awards.museumsandheritage.com/awards/2023-winners/special-recognition-23/> [Both accessed: 23 May 2023].

imperial history, and punishes the perpetrators of this war. Today, it appears more likely to take several decades than several years.

#### UKRAINE: FROM A PERIPHERAL COLONY TO THE EUROPEAN NATION-STATE

From our point of view, the empire and the nation-state are conceived of as opposites. We generally follow Roman Szporluk's view that "to qualify as an empire, a polity needs to be a great power and to be internationally recognized as a such; to extend over a large territory and include different peoples under different legal and administrative systems; to be endowed with a sense of ideological or religious mission that transcends consideration of power politics, and to act as a leader in the sphere of culture".<sup>11</sup> We also follow the concept of nation-state as proposed by Anthony Giddens: "The nation-state, which exists in a complex of other nation-states, is a set of institutional forms of governance maintaining an administrative monopoly over a territory with demarcated boundaries (borders), its rule being sanctioned by law and direct control of the means of internal and external violence".<sup>12</sup> In our opinion, Russia, after Vladimir Putin's return to the presidency in 2012, once again met almost all of the criteria of an empire, and after successfully resisting its invasion in 2022, Ukraine finally met the criteria of a nation-state.

The question of whether Tsarist Russia and the USSR were colonial empires is a subject of debate among historians internationally. The model of such an empire is primarily derived from the experiences of European overseas empires, and hence, Russian historians after 1991 have challenged the use of the category with respect to Russia as a continental empire.<sup>13</sup> A study project conducted by Alexei Miller and Mikhail Dolbilov with the goal of reinterpreting Russia's history concluded that until 1917 Russia was, in its own way, a colonial empire only with respect to lands very remote from the country's core of St Petersburg and Moscow (Caucasus, northern European

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<sup>11</sup> Roman Szporluk, *Russia, Ukraine, and the Breakup of the Soviet Union* (Stanford, 2000), 397.

<sup>12</sup> Anthony Giddens, *The Nation-State and Violence* (Cambridge, 1985), 121.

<sup>13</sup> Алексей Миллер, *Империя Романовых и национализм. Эссе по методологии исторического исследования* (Москва, 2008).

Russia, Siberia, and Central Asia). Ukraine and Belarus do not belong among them since they were considered constituent territories of the All-Russian Motherland.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, Russian historians believe that the Soviet Union never turned into an empire, let alone a colonial empire, owing to its status as a federation and to the territorial structure established in 1922, which defined a diverse range of degrees of national autonomy. Admittedly, Miller is correct when he points out that the policies pursued by the Bolsheviks reinforced the identification of various peoples with their respective ethnic lands because these lands were unified within “national” republics and identity-forming institutions within them were operated by the local elites.<sup>15</sup> However, this aspect of the influence of Lenin’s nationality policy ended with the victory of the USSR in the Second World War. Since the late Stalinist period, Russian language and culture came to exert dominance again, and propaganda about the supposed civilisational advancement of Russians as compared to other nations expanded.

Studies on Russia’s past internal colonialism by authors based outside of the country, such as Alexander Etkind<sup>16</sup> and Viacheslav Morozov,<sup>17</sup> had little resonance in Russia. Although present-day Russian historiography has produced narratives alternative to the self-asserting official one, they have been marginalised outside academia. Such was the fate of Boris Kagarlitsky’s study, which used Immanuel Wallerstein’s world-systems theory, conceptualising Russia’s history as a peripheral empire,<sup>18</sup> and of the multi-author overview of twentieth-century Russia edited by Andrey Zubov, thoroughly critical of the Soviet rule and written from a *zapadnik* position.<sup>19</sup> Unlike Russian intellectuals, who still wonder whether their country was a colonial empire in the past and whether it can become a nation-state today,

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<sup>14</sup> Михаил Долбилов and Алексей Миллер (eds), *Западные окраины Российской империи* (Москва, 2007).

<sup>15</sup> Алексей Миллер (ed.), *Наследие империй и будущее России* (Москва, 2008).

<sup>16</sup> Alexander Etkind, *Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience* (Cambridge, 2011).

<sup>17</sup> Viatcheslav Morozov, *Russia's Postcolonial Identity: A Subaltern Empire in a Eurocentric World* (Houndmills, 2015).

<sup>18</sup> Борис Кагарлицкий, *Периферийная империя: Россия и миросистема* (Москва, 2004).

<sup>19</sup> Андрей Zubov (ed.), *История России XX век, i: 1894–1939* (Москва, 2009); *id.* (ed.), *История России XX век, ii: 1939–2007* (Москва, 2009).

we follow Szporluk, who claims that the main stake of the political history of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) in the period since the Spring of Nations (1848) was whether empires were to be preserved or allowed to decompose and be replaced by nation-states.<sup>20</sup> The events of 2022 in Ukraine confirm the dominance of the nation-state tendency, although the struggle will not end in CEE until Belarus and Moldova liberate themselves from their (neo)colonial dependence on Russia.

In 1918, empires began to fall. This paved the way for states whose guiding principles were to be sovereign, civic-run, democratic, and respectful of the rights of individuals regardless of their origin, language, and religion. In reality, any country capable of living up to this ideal within CEE could only emerge near the end of the twentieth century. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there were only multinational empires or multinational states. The latter, in spite of their endorsement of civic nationalism, in fact, ensured their titular nation's dominance over the ethnic/national minorities living within their boundaries. In the CEE, the First and Second World Wars led to the absolutisation of this type of nationalism, understanding the nation as a collective encompassing not simply all inhabitants but the country's titular nation *and* ethnic/national minorities. However, after the peaceful Autumn of Nations and the dissolution of the USSR in 1989–91, countries of the region were offered the perspective of joining the EU. This paved the way for them to become more civic entities.

Indeed, the transition that has been taking place in Ukraine since 2014 justifies the belief that a nation-state that is being formed in its territory corresponds to the idea of a civic community. It is unlikely that the Ukrainian cultural core of such a state (mainly language and history) will be protected by law to a higher degree than it is in EU member states. This is despite the antagonising impact of the war – on the one hand, because apart from Eastern Galicia, Ukraine has no strong traditions of ethnic nationalism associated with a national church, and on the other, because Ukrainians desire to be recognised by the EU as a part of the European community. The ideology of ethnic nationalism present in the western part of the country aspired to the status of the ideology of an independent state in 1914, 1941, and

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<sup>20</sup> Roman Szporluk, *Russia, Ukraine, and the Breakup of the Soviet Union* (Stanford, 2000).



even, albeit in a more civic form, in 1991. Since 2014, its status has declined in a cultural melting pot in which the leading role is played by Ukrainians from the east and centre of the state.

Compared to European nation-states in the twentieth century, after 1991, Ukraine found itself in an exceptional situation: the postcolonial period of liberation from foreign rule and establishment of a nation-state lasted until 2022. Before 2014, Ukrainian historians did not perceive Tsarist Russia and the USSR as colonial empires and Ukraine as their former colony. Such an interpretation evoked an association with Third World countries, while Ukrainians aspired to be recognized as a nation that differed from its Western neighbours only in that its own state was established later (1991, rather than 1918). Interpretations of the situation in Ukraine from a postcolonial studies perspective were restricted almost exclusively to the domain of literary studies rather than historiography and social science among local and foreign scholars alike.<sup>21</sup> The few scholars who decided as early as 2000 to apply postcolonial theory to analysing changing identities across Ukrainian society<sup>22</sup> were criticised for emphasising the differences between national identity and a 'Creole' identity (and, respectively, anti- and post-Soviet memory), thus allegedly deepening internal political and/or territorial antagonisms.<sup>23</sup> Until 2014, the claim that, for Ukraine's post-communist transition into a democracy to be successful, it needed to involve a commitment not only to politics, economy, and state formation<sup>24</sup> but also to anti-colonial nation formation,<sup>25</sup> was dismissed as inconsistent with the experiences of other countries in CEE. The prospect that, due to Russia's increasing influence on the identity-building processes in Ukraine after the Orange Revolution, Ukraine would not be able to become an effective democratic state until it completely removes symbolic

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<sup>21</sup> Myroslav Shkandrij, *Russia and Ukraine: Literature and the Discourse of Empire from Napoleonic to Postcolonial Times* (Montreal, 2001); Olga Hnatiuk, *Pożegnanie z imperium. Ukraińskie dyskusje o tożsamości* (Lublin, 2003); Тамара Гундорова, *Транзитна культура. Символи постколоніальної травми: статті та есеї* (Київ, 2013).

<sup>22</sup> Микола Рябчук, *Дві України: реальні межі, віртуальні війни* (Київ, 2003).

<sup>23</sup> Ярослав Грицак, 'Двадцять дві України', *Критика*, vi, 4(54) (2001), 3–6.

<sup>24</sup> Claus Offe, 'Capitalism by Democratic Design? Democratic Theory Facing the Triple Transition in East Central Europe', *Social Research*, lviii, 4 (1991), 865–81.

<sup>25</sup> Taras Kuzio, 'Transition in Post-Communist States: Triple or Quadruple?', *Politics*, xxi, 3 (2001), 168–77.

remnants of the communist and imperial heritage in the symbolic space, was not seriously considered. Finally, there were no attempts to apply a colonial perspective in Ukrainian historiography.<sup>26</sup>

In 2014, after the outbreak of the war, Timothy Snyder proposed an interpretation of the history of Ukraine as a nation that fell victim to the colonial policies of Russia/USSR and the Third Reich, in which the period after 1991 figures as the battlefield of clashing neo-colonialism and anti-colonialism. He forecasted the postcolonial phase coming to an end through Ukraine's eventual accession into the EU, seeing the latter as the most efficient guarantor of sovereignty and open collaboration between nation-states.<sup>27</sup> Some voiced criticism of this proposition. Yaroslav Hrytsak identified oversimplifications in Snyder's definition of Ukraine as a "colony" of Russia/Soviet Union, pointing to the superior degree of industrialisation compared to the "metropolis" as well as the careers open to Ruthenians/Ukrainians in the core of the Russian state and their increased access to the colonising elite. He proposed that the history of Ukraine be approached in terms of its status as 'contested borderlands' between Europe and Russia. However, in Hrytsak's interpretation, the impact of modernisation coming from the West on Ukrainian history is even greater than Snyder has asserted.<sup>28</sup> Likewise, in his synthesis of the country's history published after the outbreak of the war in 2014, Serhy Plokhy pushed to the foreground Ukraine's emergence in the modern era as a response to the challenges of freedom, equality, and secularisation brought on by Europe.<sup>29</sup>

However, after February 2022, the perception of Ukraine as a colony of Russia/Soviet Union and of the ongoing conflict as an *anti-colonial* (not postcolonial) war came to the forefront in Ukraine and abroad. Timothy Snyder's critique of Germany was not confined only to the Third Reich's colonial plans with respect to Ukraine but also addressed the attitude of contemporary German intellectual and political elites

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<sup>26</sup> In this context, Stephen Velychenko has been the rare exception, see, for instance: *id.*, 'The Issue of Russian Colonialism in Ukrainian Thought. Dependency Identity and Development', *Ab Imperio*, 1 (2002), 323–67.

<sup>27</sup> Timothy Snyder, 'Integration and Disintegration: Europe, Ukraine, and the World', *Slavic Review*, lxxiv, 4 (2015), 695–707.

<sup>28</sup> Yaroslav Hrytsak, 'The Postcolonial Is Not Enough', *Slavic Review*, lxxiv, 4 (2015), 732–7.

<sup>29</sup> Serhy Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe: History of Ukraine* (New York, 2015).

toward Ukraine.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, the opinions of Western intellectuals calling for the decolonisation of international studies on Ukraine and CEE are now more prominent than ever before.<sup>31</sup>

### UKRAINIANS AND THE HISTORICAL PAST

Looking from the perspective of the societal transformations after 1991, one can see how Ukrainian society consolidated over time as a political community – a nation – and how this process coincided with the civic mobilisation in 2004, 2014, and finally 2022 (Fig. 1). At the beginning of Ukrainian independence, identification with the state (as a citizen of Ukraine in the first place) did not exceed 50 per cent and was nearly as strong as local identification (identifying oneself with one's place of residence); it increased to nearly 90 per cent the moment independence was seriously threatened by external aggression.

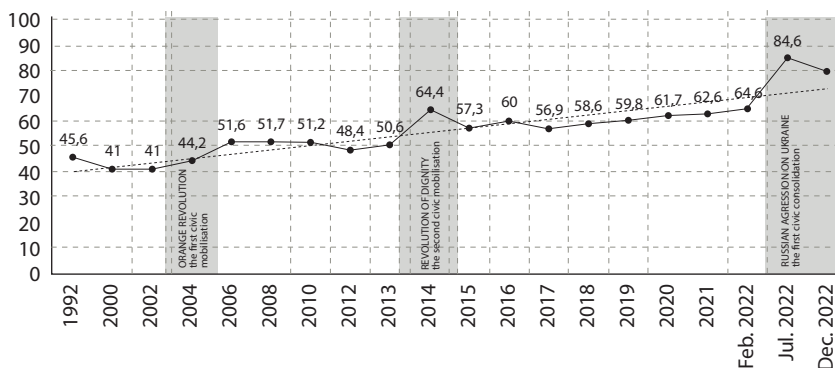


Fig. 1. The identification with the state in Ukrainian society since the beginning of independence.

Data source: Institute of Sociology, National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Online seminar 'Historians and the War. Rethinking the Future: Discussion with Prof. Timothy Snyder', 9 June 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jp5MT4dJ1dw> [Accessed: 7 Nov. 2023].

<sup>31</sup> Maria Mälksoo, 'The Postcolonial Moment in Russia's War Against Ukraine', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 11 May 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2022.2074947> [Accessed: 7 Nov. 2023].

<sup>32</sup> Based on: Сергій Дембіцький, *Громадська думка в Україні після 10 місяців війни*, [https://www.kiis.com.ua/materials/pr/20230115\\_g/Презентація%20моніторингу%2C%202022%20—%20фінал.pdf](https://www.kiis.com.ua/materials/pr/20230115_g/Презентація%20моніторингу%2C%202022%20—%20фінал.pdf) [Accessed: 10 May 2023].

The growing identification with the Ukrainian state also meant a gradual distancing from Russia and its political and cultural influence. The process began before the USSR's dissolution, as indicated by Zenon Kohut, among others.<sup>33</sup> The extensive literature on nation-building in the region<sup>34</sup> has not paid much attention to the historical cultures of the societies within it, while in contemporary Ukraine, changes in how the society looks at its past and reinterprets it seem to be the most significant result of Russian aggression. In early 2023, most Ukrainians (64 per cent) agreed with the statement that Ukraine used to be a colony of the Russian Empire.<sup>35</sup> The fact that such a question even appears in a public opinion poll is meaningful in itself. Before the Russian aggression of 2022, such an idea could have been discussed at an academic conference but did not enter public discourse.

The aggression also sparked a growing interest in the country's past. In a survey conducted in 2018, the percentage of Ukrainians who declared an interest in the history of Ukraine was already high (at 77 per cent), but after the aggression, it increased even further (to 82 per cent).<sup>36</sup> Even if until 2018, many Ukrainians shared the Soviet narrative about Ukrainian history, as revealed in our previous study,<sup>37</sup> the situation changed quickly. This was partly because the

<sup>33</sup> Zenon Kohut, *Korіння ідентичності. Студії з ранньомодерної та модерної історії України* (Київ, 2004), esp. the chapter 'Історія як поле битви' (History as a battleground), 218–44.

<sup>34</sup> See: Roger Brubaker, 'Nationhood and the National Question in the Soviet Union and Post-Soviet Eurasia: An Institutional Account', *Theory and Society*, 23 (1994), 47–78; Ronald G. Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Stanford, 1993).

<sup>35</sup> *Історична пам'ять – результати соціологічного опитування дорослих жителів України*, Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, January 2023, [https://kiis.com.ua/materials/news/20230320\\_d2/UCBI\\_History2023\\_rpt-UA\\_fin.pdf](https://kiis.com.ua/materials/news/20230320_d2/UCBI_History2023_rpt-UA_fin.pdf) [Accessed: 5 June 2023]; (hereinafter: KIIS).

<sup>36</sup> The first value represents those who answered they are 'definitely' or 'rather' interested in Ukrainian history. See: Joanna Konieczna-Sałamatin, 'Jak Polacy i Ukraińcy interesują się historią i skąd czerpią wiedzę', in Barbara Markowska (ed.), *Dyskurs historyczny w mediach masowych* (Warszawa, 2021), 39. The second value comes from the KIIS 2023 survey and reflects the percentage of those who gave their interest a value of 6 to 10 on a 1–10 scale.

<sup>37</sup> Joanna Konieczna-Sałamatin, Natalya Otrishchenko, and Tomasz Stryjek, *History. People. Events. Research report on the memory of contemporary Poles and Ukrainians* (Warszawa, 2018), <https://depot.ceon.pl/handle/123456789/15975> [Accessed: 11 May 2023]; Joanna Konieczna-Sałamatin and Tomasz Stryjek, 'Uczestnicy kultury

anti-Soviet narrative was already well-established and consistent and partly because of the activity of state institutions, such as those described in this article. In the survey conducted in early 2023, 68 per cent of respondents said that the current war changed their perception of Ukraine's history.<sup>38</sup>

These changes are visible in the views expressed on the Second World War, its outcomes, and the role of Ukraine in it, as well as in the attitudes towards the dissolution of the USSR. One of the indicators of a change in the way of thinking about the Second World War is the relatively high percentage of those who feel that the USSR bears partial responsibility for causing the war: 50 per cent name it as a culprit directly and a further 35 per cent – indirectly. Only 7 per cent deny any responsibility on the part of the USSR.<sup>39</sup> When asked what Ukrainians fought for in the Soviet Army during the Second World War, the most popular answer is “for the liberation of Ukraine”. This is also a new phenomenon – previously, a vast majority used to claim it was for the “Soviet homeland” (Fig. 2).

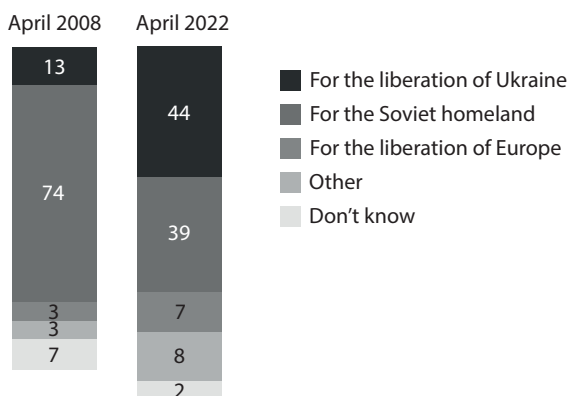


Fig. 2. What did Ukrainians fight for in the Soviet Army during the Second World War (1941–1945)?

Data source: Rating Group.

historycznej. Pamięć zbiorowa Polaków i Ukraińców w świetle badań społecznych', in Tomasz Stryjek and Volodymyr Sklokin (eds), *Kultury historyczne Polski i Ukrainy* (Warszawa, 2021), 233–67.

<sup>38</sup> KIIS.

<sup>39</sup> KIIS, 32.

To complete this picture, we should add that most Ukrainians feel that 8 May, rather than 9 May, is the proper date to commemorate the victims of the Second World War (62 per cent voted for the former and only 22 per cent for the latter date). It should be stressed that under Soviet rule, Victory Day (9 May) was a major holiday, celebrated not only publicly but also privately in many Ukrainian families. Now (in January 2023), the former date is preferred in every Ukrainian region and all social categories, regardless of gender, age, and level of education.

Attitudes towards the dissolution of the USSR illustrate both the speed and the direction of these changes (Fig. 3). The percentage of those who do not miss the USSR began to grow before the Russian aggression. Nevertheless, the ongoing war sped up this process.

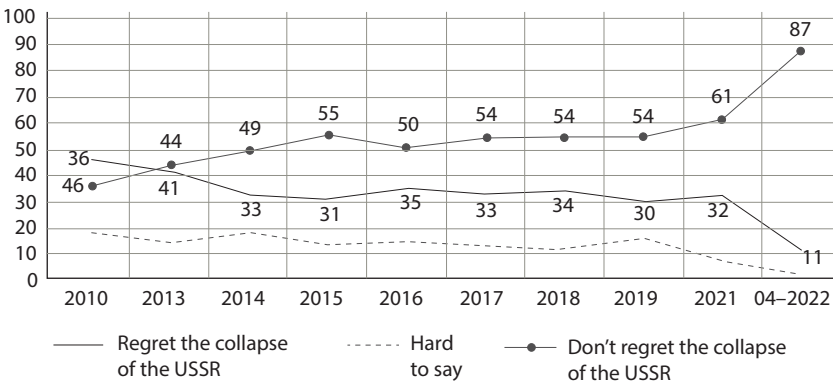


Fig. 3. Attitudes toward the collapse of the USSR (2010–22).

Data source: <https://ratinggroup.ua/research/ukraine/>.

In reference to the importance of changes in the narratives of major museums, it should be noted that before the war of 2022, museums were among the most frequently used and most trusted sources of knowledge about history: 34 per cent named museums as their source of knowledge and 45 per cent considered them a “fully credible” source, putting museums second only to eyewitness accounts.<sup>40</sup>

It is also important to emphasise that all of these changes – the cultural liberation from Soviet and Russian influence, as well as

<sup>40</sup> Konieczna-Sałamatin, ‘Jak Polacy i Ukraińcy’, 54.

the growing importance of national history and Ukraine-centred narratives – are accompanied by a westward turn in geopolitical orientation expressed through an increasing interest in joining the European Union. The signs are already present in the survey mentioned above from 2018, which showed a positive correlation between taking pride in Ukrainian history and the belief that all aspects of life in the country would benefit from European integration. The idea of European integration is becoming a part of the Ukrainian national identity.

#### POLITICISATION OF THE PAST: THE SECOND WORLD WAR IN THE POST-COLONIAL CONTEXT

In the current situation, Ukraine's historical past and cultural heritage have regained significance because it fosters a sense of community and justifies political actions.<sup>41</sup> Ukraine's postcolonial status is revealed in the difficulties in its functioning as a sovereign state. In fact, those difficulties stem from the fact of a complex historical past shared with Russia under its guise as Soviet Union. In fact, the shared burden of the past made it harder for Ukrainians to fight for a separate, autonomous, and coherent vision of the future. From this point of view, de-Sovietisation was necessary, even if it was not initially applied consistently due to the shifting politics of memory of the ruling elites.<sup>42</sup> Since the Orange Revolution (2004–5), attempts were made to build up a unified national memory<sup>43</sup> from various historical legacies.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Maxim Levada, 'Muzea ukraińskie po 24 lutego 2022 roku', *Wiadomości Archeologiczne*, 73 (2022), 293–306; Anna Wylegała and Małgorzata Głowacka-Grajper (eds), *The Burden of the Past: History, Memory, and Identity in Contemporary Ukraine* (Bloomington, 2020); Tomasz Stryjek and Joanna Konieczna-Salamatin (eds), *The Politics of Memory in Poland and Ukraine. From Reconciliation to De-Conciliation* (London–New York, 2022).

<sup>42</sup> Polina Verbytska and Roman Kuzmyn, 'Between Amnesia and the "War of Memories": Politics of Memory in the Museum Narratives of Ukraine', *Muzeológia a kultúrne dedičstvo*, vii, 2 (2019), 23–34.

<sup>43</sup> Oksana Myshlovska, 'Delegitimizing the Communist Past and Building a New Sense of Community: The Politics of Transitional Justice and Memory in Ukraine', *International Journal for History, Culture and Modernity* 7 (2019), 372–405.

<sup>44</sup> There are three basic models of Ukrainian historical legacy: imperial (centred on Catherine II), post-Soviet (centred on Joseph Stalin), and nationalist (centred on Stepan Bandera). See Andre Liebich, Oksana Myshlovska, and Victoria Sereda, with

After the annexation of Crimea, the national memory was centred on the condemnation, ousting, and delegitimisation of the Soviet narrative, replacing it with the memory and narratives of the heroism and suffering of the Ukrainian nation. The Revolution of Dignity and the victims of the conflict in the Donbas have become the symbols and martyrs of modern Ukraine, serving to unite the country in a fight against corruption and foreign aggression.<sup>45</sup>

The primary framing for the ongoing war is the heritage of the Second World War, the memory of which is still vivid in Ukrainian society and has undergone a symbolic transformation over the past decade.<sup>46</sup> Until 2013, the concept of the *Great Patriotic War* and of *Victory* had been referred to more than 200 times in Ukrainian legal acts.<sup>47</sup> In this period, nationalisation of memory was associated with a reappraisal of the Soviet narrative and the construction of a “joint victory” as an important symbolic resource to be used by authorities at the regional and national levels. There is a direct connection between the interpretation of the history of the Second World War and the estimation of its significance for Ukraine on the one hand and

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Oleksandra Gaidai and Iryna Sklokina, ‘The Ukrainian Past and Present: Legacies, Memory and Attitudes’, in Oksana Myshlovska and Ulrich Schmid (eds), *Regionalism without Regions. Reconceptualizing Ukraine’s Heterogeneity* (Budapest, 2019), 88.

<sup>45</sup> Elżbieta Olzacka, ‘The Role of Museums in Creating National Community in Wartime Ukraine’, *Nationalities Papers*, xlix, 6 (2021), 1028–44.

<sup>46</sup> See *Книга пам'яті України. Електронна база даних 1941–1945* [Memory Book of Ukraine, Electronic Database 1941–1945], Союз поисковых отрядов Украины, <https://memory-book.ua/> [Accessed: 21 Aug. 2022]. The website, whose goal is the preservation of the memory of those who died while defending their natives from different regions of Ukraine, was established in 2008. It collects information on the participants in the Great Patriotic War. The Memory Book can be seen as a follow-up to the *National Book of Memory of Holodomor Victims, 1932–1933* (*Національна книга пам'яті жертв Голодомору 1932–1933 років в Україні*), a major project of the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory published in 19 volumes since 2008 (see Liebich *et al.*, ‘Ukrainian Past and Present’, 94). The website is in Ukrainian only – the main page includes a database of 1,005,597 names, along with documentary materials, scans of documents, etc. Additionally, a new grassroots project has emerged, commemorating the victims of the war with Russia since 2014: Ukrainian Memorial: In memory of the heroes who died for Ukraine, <https://ukraine-memorial.org/en/> [Accessed: 25 May 2023].

<sup>47</sup> Тетяна Журженко, “‘Чужа війна’ чи ‘спільна Перемога’? Націоналізація пам'яті про Другу світову війну на україно-російському прикордонні”, *Україна Модерна*, 18 (2011), 102–3.



the post-colonial search for a national identity and the geopolitical choice between Russia and the West on the other.

President Leonid Kuchma strove to emphasise the heroism of the Ukrainians who served in the Soviet Army. In 1999, he re-established the Day of the Soviet Army (February 23), under the new name of the Day of the Defenders of Motherland. In 2000, a law On the Immortalisation of Victory in the Great Patriotic War of 1941–5 defined the Day of Victory as “the day of triumph of the immortal act of bravery of the people – victors over fascism, countrywide memory about the struggle for freedom and independence of the Fatherland”.<sup>48</sup> Going a step further, President Viktor Yushchenko introduced elements of counter-narratives into the mythologised discourse of the Great Patriotic War and abandoned this Soviet term for a Western European one. His policy of memory was oriented towards the nationalisation and careful de-Sovietisation of the war narrative. This purpose was achieved by two parallel initiatives. First, the war against the Third Reich was presented as a national Ukrainian achievement and not as part of an overall Soviet effort. In 2009, Yushchenko established the Day of Ukraine's Liberation from Fascist Invaders, which highlighted the suffering of Ukraine under occupation and its considerable role in the victory over Nazism. Second, the struggle of the OUN and UPA was officially recognised by giving the highest military award of the Hero of Ukraine to the leaders of the two organisations, Stepan Bandera (in 2010) and Roman Shukhevych (in 2007).<sup>49</sup>

Moreover, Yushchenko implemented a symbolic reconciliation between Ukrainian soldiers from the Soviet Army and OUN/UPA partisans who, although they fought against each other, nevertheless also struggled for an independent Ukraine against two totalitarian regimes. However, at the time, a major part of the society – namely those who subscribed to the “eastern Slavic” identity and memory – was not yet ready to accept the transformation of Russia/USSR from an ally into an enemy. In addition, Russians were perceived as a lesser threat than the Nazis. However, Russia's aggression in 2014 accelerated the erosion of this tendency and as a result, Russia is now being thought of as the main enemy of Ukraine, in public and museal discourse alike.

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<sup>48</sup> Liebich *et al.*, ‘Ukrainian Past and Present’, 85.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

The symbolic ‘substitution’ of enemies, the eventual Ukrainisation of the narrative of the Second World War, and the official shift into a European context took place during the presidencies of Petro Poroshenko and Volodymyr Zelensky. By decree of the Verkhovna Rada of April 2015, the ‘Second World War’ finally replaced the Soviet name “Great Patriotic War” with all political and historical consequences. Then, Victory Day was supplemented by a Day of Memory and Reconciliation, focussed on the war experiences of ordinary people. Poroshenko dealt even more radically with the tradition of celebrating the aforementioned Day of the Defenders of Motherland on 23 February (established in 1922 as the Day of the Red Army). While cancelling this holiday, he established a new one on 14 October, under the name of Day of the Defenders of Ukraine. Its coincidence with the Feast of Our Lady in the Orthodox Calendar, observed by Cossacks in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, as well as with the establishment of the UPA in 1942, did not leave any doubts as to which of Ukraine’s neighbours it was addressed against. In this way, a cult of heroes of the Great Patriotic War, systematically promoted during the Soviet period, was turned into official Ukrainian commemorative practices focussing on Ukrainian soldiers (those in the Soviet army, as well as partisans and nationalist forces) who died during the Second World War. The construction of “the Ukrainian people” as an autonomous actor in the war means a gradual Ukrainisation of memory.

#### BETWEEN THE WARS: THE CRYSTALLISATION OF A NATION

Museums are vehicles for identity narratives and react quickly to political changes significant for building the national community.<sup>50</sup> The most symbolic place connecting the Second World War and the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war is the National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War in Kyiv, with its huge Memorial Complex and the statue of the Motherland that looks to the East, often referred to as Kyiv’s Statue of Liberty. The museum, originally called the Ukrainian State Museum of the Great Patriotic War of 1941–1945, relocated to the site in 1981. It was renamed in 2015, on the wave of decommunisation. Before the spectacular opening of the Memorial

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<sup>50</sup> Olzacka, ‘The Role of Museums’, 1028–44.

Complex on 9 May 1981, with Leonid Brezhnev in attendance, the museum – originally established in 1974 – was housed in the Klovskiy Palace in Kiev.

The entire Memorial Complex is located in the Pechersk district in the representative part of the city, on the hills where the Kyiv fortress used to stand. The museum's exhibition complex, consisting of 16 halls on three floors, focuses on the Second World War from the Ukrainian perspective, with a significant presence of the conflict in Donbas and the ongoing war. As the dynamics of the entire field of memory described above shifted, the story the museum told about the war changed several times. Therefore, the museal narrative has an unstable and inconstant meaning, displaying the process which we have called a crystallisation of de-colonised nationhood. In the subsequent paragraphs, we discuss some of those narrative changes to show the changing institutional function of the museum, now transformed from a tool of colonised memory to a weapon of an anti-colonial movement.

Until the moment of a full-scale invasion, the permanent exhibition was a kind of palimpsest combining many different narrative layers – the original Soviet display had been modified since the early 1990s after Ukraine gained independence.<sup>51</sup> The narrative gradually shifted from an unequivocal focus on the victory of the Red Army to the tragic and human dimension of war: the museum team introduced examples of democratised and individualised memory, highlighting the importance of authenticity of personal items, showing the lives of ordinary people on a par with heroic commanders. This gesture responds to the aforementioned moment of historical policy that set out to construct a Ukrainian identity by marginalising particularly difficult and painful or potentially divisive questions, such as the UPA and its struggle against the Soviets, Stalin's responsibility for the Holodomor, or Ukrainian participation in the Holocaust. Along with the name change, the museum changed the time frame for its

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<sup>51</sup> This section is written in the past tense because the permanent exhibition was closed after 24 Feb. 2022. According to the director (speaking in May 2023), the decision was made to wait until the end of the current war before proposing a modification or a new framing that would encompass 100 years of Ukrainian struggle for independence. During the war, the museum has become involved in the work of commemorating atrocities, the suffering of civilians, and the heroism of soldiers through several temporary exhibitions displayed in different locations within the Memorial Complex.



Fig. 4. The museum building provides the base for the Motherland monument, in front of which there are tanks symbolising the ongoing conflict between Ukraine and Russia (since 2014).

Photo by Barbara Markowska-Marczak (June 2021).

exhibition, extending beyond 1941–5 by adding information about the German invasion of Poland in 1939 and the Ribbentrop–Molotov Pact. Despite the attention devoted to Soviet partisans, a section on the activities of the UPA described them as ‘patriots’ fighting against all occupiers.<sup>52</sup> Additionally, the end of the war was subjected to a subtle deconstruction. One of the most spectacular installations of the main exhibition was dedicated to the siege of the Reichstag in Berlin. At the same time, the exhibition proclaimed that the war ended not in May, but in September 1945, after Japan’s surrender was accepted by Soviet general Kuzma Derevyanko, who was a Ukrainian.

However, after 2014, the museum team tried to formulate a new approach to the history of the Second World War, re-reading it as an unfinished war. The change in the narrative adds a new layer to the exhibition in the form of a series of artistic installations arranged as

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<sup>52</sup> Rafał Wnuk and Piotr Majewski, ‘Between Heroization and Martyrology: The Second World War in Selected Museums in Central and Eastern Europe’, *Polish Review*, lx, 4 (2015), 3–30.



Fig. 5–6. Installations added to the permanent exhibition under the title ‘The War Unfinished’.

Photos by Barbara Markowska-Marczak (June 2021).

ahistorical ‘implants’, which universalise and sharpen the emotional message of historical events (Holodomor, Battle of Kyiv, Ukrainian exodus, crossing of the Dnieper).

The main exhibition culminated in a spacious Remembrance Hall (Fig. 7). It was arranged as if for a funeral ceremony, turning attention to the collective tragedy of the entire Ukrainian nation. In the room, personal belongings and death notifications, along with thousands of photographs of victims, were arrayed on a very long table. The final artefact, a cross made from the remains of weapons collected on battlefields (Fig. 6), serves the purpose of sacralising death and suffering, which was a novelty in comparison to the reconstructionist character of the old version of display.

Thus, we come to the representation of the war experience in a catalogue published in 2018, entitled *War. Facets*: “The edition is an attempt to isolate certain episodes from the general picture of the Second World War, which could serve as a marker of meaning in understanding of what had happened more than 75 years ago”.<sup>53</sup> The museum researchers divided the catalogue into nine thematic sections that help to answer the questions: “What is the war and what are its consequences, what do people feel when they fall into

<sup>53</sup> Lena Lehasova, *Vīna. Hrani/War. Facets* (Kyiv, 2018), 11.



Fig. 7. Remembrance Hall.

Photo by Barbara Markowska-Marczak (June 2021).

a military ‘meat grinder’ and how do they survive in these terrible conditions? [...]. The passing of the war was especially tragic because there was no independence of Ukraine. In fact, the Ukrainian lands and people have become [a] bargaining chip in the confrontation of two totalitarian systems”.<sup>54</sup> The last section seems to be the most meaningful; it juxtaposes photographs from the destroyed Stalino (current Donetsk) in 1943 with those from the Donbas region bombed by Russian Troops in 2014.<sup>55</sup> The analogies and parallels between the two wars are no longer suggested since the catalogue was published after the annexation of Crimea.<sup>56</sup> The narrative directly modified the framing of the war:

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*; titles of the sections: ‘War Syndrome’, ‘No Choice’, ‘Invaders’, ‘Survival’, ‘Holocaust’, ‘Women’, ‘Children’, ‘Destruction’; the final part is entitled ‘War Is (Not) Over’, which indicates the concept at the core of the reinterpretation.

<sup>55</sup> This procedure is repeated and intensely expanded in the project *Parallels*: [https://warmuseum.kyiv.ua/\\_eng/\\_presentations/parallels/#null](https://warmuseum.kyiv.ua/_eng/_presentations/parallels/#null) [Accessed: 28 Nov. 2023].

<sup>56</sup> Grzegorz Demel, ‘Matka-Ojczyzna wzywa! Muzeum Historii Ukrainy podczas Drugiej Wojny Światowej – Kompleks Memorialny w Kijowie: ukraińska narracja o wojnie’, *Kultura i społeczeństwo*, 2 (2019), 213.

After the expulsion of the Nazis from Ukraine, the battles did not stop. The symbol of the struggle was the activity of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and the resistance to the Soviet government of the stateless military formation – The Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) [...]. However, their enormous sacrifice, the desire to continue the struggle in difficult geopolitical conditions, and the propensity to sustain long resistance, even in camps and special settlements, made it possible to preserve the idea of the Ukrainian state in the minds and souls of future generation[s], to create conditions for its realization in the future [...]. Nowadays, when Ukraine struggles for its independence and fights in the East of the country against Russia's aggression, whose leaders want to bring it back to its sphere of influence, these issues are particularly actual.<sup>57</sup>

For the museum team, the war in the Donbas created a necessary political context for updating the framing of the narrative about the Second World War. Since its outbreak, the re-framed main exhibition has been placed within a constellation of temporary expositions as part of the 'Ukrainian East' project, which provides constant, public commentary on the changing reality of the war. The museum has once again changed its purpose and mission. On the one hand, while deconstructing the earlier exposition centred on the Great Patriotic War, the museum staff used the same artefacts to express the overwhelming misfortune and terror of Ukrainians living in the 'bloodlands' (as Timothy Snyder named the territory of Eastern Europe including Ukraine and Belarus<sup>58</sup>) between two totalitarianisms and striving at all costs to establish a sovereign state. On the other hand, this innovation led to the de-heroising and de-romanticising of war while mythologising the sacrifice and heroism of citizens taking part in the Maidan (the Heavenly Hundred)<sup>59</sup> and volunteering from 2014 on to fight in the East. This display told the stories of everyday heroes, like chaplains, medics, journalists, or artists who actively served the nation.

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<sup>57</sup> Lehasova, Viina. *Hrani/War. Facets*, 13.

<sup>58</sup> Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York, 2012).

<sup>59</sup> The symbolic name 'Heavenly Hundred' refers to the participants killed during Euromaidan. To commemorate the heroes, Petro Poroshenko proposed the law on state decorations be amended by introducing the Order of the Heroes of the Heaven's Hundred. See: 'УКАЗ ПРЕЗИДЕНТА УКРАЇНИ № 844/2014 Про орден Героїв Небесної Сотні', Президент України Петро Порошенко – Офіційне інтернет-представництво, 3 листопада 2014, archived at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20141103190938/http://www.president.gov.ua/documents/18400.html> [Accessed: 26 Sept. 2023].



Fig. 8–9. Fragments of a temporary exhibition (‘On the Line of Fire’) supplementing the main narrative of the museum in 2021. It was divided into three parts: ‘Ours’, ‘Aliens’, and ‘Non-Aliens’.

Photos by Barbara Markowska-Marczak (June 2021).

This meant the promotion of a new patriotism and of new models of morality. Simultaneously with the creation of unique heroes, images of the Other and of the Enemy have crystallised.<sup>60</sup>

Recently, the dynamic of these commemorative efforts even intensified. After Russia’s attack on Ukraine in 2022, the museum was closed to visitors for several weeks, but the team took steps to chronicle the war from day one, archiving reports from each day under the slogan “Ukraine is fighting”. Significantly, instead of emphasising the number of victims, the museum website features images with detailed documentation of the losses of the enemy.<sup>61</sup> The website implies tremendous effort to create a new narrative framework. The main enemy is still Nazism: “All activities of the Memorial are aimed at helping people to understand origins of tragedies of wars, showing ways to prevent them and uncover the historical truth about the sacrifice and heroism of the Ukrainian people in the struggle against

<sup>60</sup> Olzacka, ‘The Role of Museums’, 1036.

<sup>61</sup> The daily chronicle of the war was maintained until the 200th day of the war. From that moment on, it is forbidden to provide information about war damages and losses in a public sphere, so all images disappeared. At the very moment on the museum’s website, we find a simply message (in red colour): ‘The Russian-Ukrainian war continues. See you after the victory!’, [https://warmuseum.kyiv.ua/\\_eng/visitors/time/](https://warmuseum.kyiv.ua/_eng/visitors/time/) [Accessed: 27 Sept. 2023].



Nazism and promote the patriotic upbringing of citizens, young people in particular".<sup>62</sup> However, previously it was represented by Germans, the Nazi regime, and now by Putin's Russia, or more precisely, by Ruscism (a neologism that identifies Putinism as Russian fascism).<sup>63</sup> In order to achieve coherence in the message, the exhibition's creators resort more and more to religious language, sacralising ideas of the nation and the time and space of the ongoing war, and focusing directly on Russians as eternal enemies. Although the main exhibition has been closed since the invasion, the museum remained active, and in June 2022, another part of the aforementioned temporary exhibition was opened, entitled "Ukraine – Crucifixion".<sup>64</sup> It seems to be an unusual extension of the historical practice of a museum when an exposition on an ongoing war is created in real-time as an immediate commemoration and accusation: with the help of authentic materials and photographs, the horrible realities of full-scale Russian aggression are brutally exposed.<sup>65</sup>

It can be assumed that this commitment stems from something more than pure activism. It means a deep immersion in the political milieu, a politicisation of the historical past perceived as a platform for realising a national project. In a broadly postcolonial context, one can also see how the nation's consolidation process has intensified not only on the symbolic level but also on the imaginary and emotional level. Using the old idea of Ukrainian martyrdom, the symbolic identification has been completely changed, and the field

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<sup>62</sup> 'Museum History', Національний музей історії України у Другій світовій війні, [https://warmuseum.kiev.ua/\\_eng/museum/about\\_us/](https://warmuseum.kiev.ua/_eng/museum/about_us/) [Accessed: 17 Aug. 2022].

<sup>63</sup> Timothy Snyder, 'The War in Ukraine Has Unleashed a New Word', *New York Times Magazine*, 22 Apr. 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/22/magazine/ruscism-ukraine-russia-war.html> [Accessed: 22 Aug. 2022].

<sup>64</sup> In the eyes of Taras Shevchenko, the Cossack period was a golden age of liberation that ended with the brutal suppression by the Tsarist Empire, whose leaders 'crucified' Ukraine. See Uilleam Blacker, 'Martyrdom, Spectacle, and Public Space: Ukraine's National Martyrology from Shevchenko to the Maidan', *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society*, i, 2 (2015), 257.

<sup>65</sup> In May 2023, aside from a modified version of 'Ukraine's Crucifixion', there are three additional small thematic expositions: 'Children' (about child victims of war), 'Defenders' (portraits of young heroes from the frontlines), and a room with detailed documentation of the first day of war, 24 February 2022. All exhibitions are held within the Memorial Complex; see [https://warmuseum.kyiv.ua/\\_eng/expositions/current\\_exhibitions/](https://warmuseum.kyiv.ua/_eng/expositions/current_exhibitions/) [Accessed: 26 Sept. 2023].

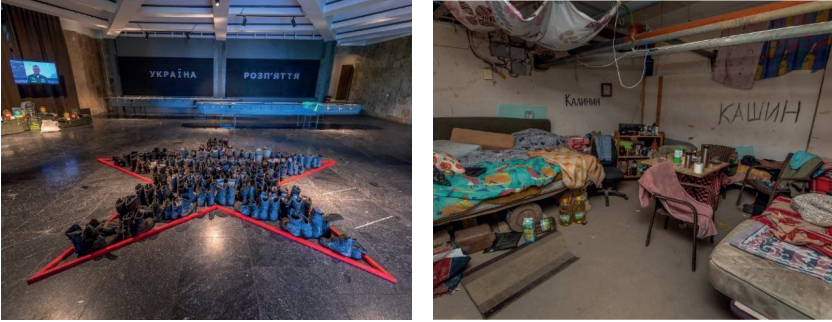


Fig. 10–11. Fragments of the temporary exhibition ‘Ukraine – Crucifixion’.  
Photos by Lyudmyla Rybchenko (museum’s promotional materials).

has been restructured. The sacrifice is addressed to a new symbolic Other: no longer the Russians (as a fraternal nation), and not Russia (as the imperial hegemon), but the West: Americans and NATO, Europe and the EU have become points of reference for Ukrainians.

## CONCLUSIONS

Our findings seem to suggest that in Ukraine, changes initiated by the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 accelerated sharply and, after 2022, took the form of a qualitative change. This involved an increasingly forceful and deep process of de-Sovietisation and de-Russification with a simultaneous intensive Ukrainisation. The nation became crystallised on different levels of identification: internal and external. The field of memory and the historical narrative are changing because the subject of this story is changing – the image of the Ukrainian nation is gaining definition in relation to Russia, the EU, and the rest of the world. It takes on a distinct shape and a symbolic dimension. The acceleration of nation-building processes in Ukraine manifests itself also in the blurring of regional divisions in the society and the removal – or at least, weakening – of identity ambivalence. The result is not only a de-Sovietisation of memory, but also a reorientation in geopolitical choices – the share of those willing to join the institutions of the West, such as the EU or NATO, has never been so high.

The war with Russia is now interpreted as Ukraine’s passport to Europe. The symbolic framework of this conflict evidently looks back to the Second World War as a fundamental event that

needs to be retold and reconsidered. Full-scale war undoubtedly leads to the strengthening of anti-colonial nationalism: Ukrainian-ness is described on a scale determined by one's involvement in the war, what position one takes, and not so much one's place of origin, residence, or language. Based on the example of the developing ideas about the Second World War, one can see how Ukrainians created the foundations of their national mythology. The invocation of religious meanings to universalise suffering, through reference to the influence of war chaplains from various religions who participated in military operations in the Donbas, instead of an orientation towards a trans-national experience, served as the cornerstone for the development of a hegemonic notion of the Ukrainian nation. Religious meanings, invoked to universalise suffering by reference to the power of religion became the foundation for an hegemonic idea of the Ukrainian nation.

The message promulgated by one of the most relevant national institutions is aimed at 'abstracting' the specificity and uniqueness of the Ukrainian experience from the pan-European, universal, or even Soviet suffering. According to this message, it was the Ukrainian nation that was the greatest victim of the Second World War, the war that has not ended yet in its symbolic and imaginary aftermath. The figure of the main enemy has changed from Nazi Germany to the neo-imperial Russia. We predict that this narrative will continue to change until it reaches its crystallised form through this semantic shift – the essence of the war will remain victory over fascism at a terrible sacrifice. Eighty years later, this story is one about a moral victory (in the absence of certainty of a military triumph) over Ruscism.<sup>66</sup> The proposal President Zelensky submitted to the Verkhovna Rada on 8 May 2023, to move the Day of Victory over Nazism in the Second World War from 9 May to 8 May, replacing the Day of Remembrance and Reconciliation celebrated since 2015, will likely prove to be the most symbolic moment of the end of the post-colonial attempts to mould

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<sup>66</sup> In response to Ukrainian actions in the symbolic sphere, the Russians organised an exhibition that opened on 22 April 2022, at the Victory Museum on Poklonnaya Gora (Moscow), devoted to the 'ordinary' Ukrainian fascism, and on the anniversary of the outbreak of the Great Patriotic War, NATO-ism inscribed in the vision of NATO as the greatest enemy of the Slavs, representing the forces of darkness. The symmetry in the architecture and rhetoric of the two exhibitions is striking: 'Обыкновенный нацизм', Музей Победы, <https://victorymuseum.ru/playbill/exhibitions/vystavka-obyknovenny-natsizm/> [Accessed: 22 Aug. 2022].

a hybrid memory of the Second World War in Ukraine. At the same time, on 9 May, Zelensky announced a Day of Europe to commemorate Robert Schuman's visionary speech from 1950, a practice borrowed from EU states. The adoption of this law by the parliament on 29 May 2023 meant that Ukraine's bond with the colonial heritage of Russia and the USSR was finally broken – symbolically, at least.

*proofreading Antoni Górny*

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**Tomasz Stryjek** – contemporary historiography, policies of memory, and historical cultures of the Central and Eastern European countries; historian and political scientist; head of the Department of Research on Eastern Europe's History and Memory in the Institute of Political Studies Polish Academy of Sciences; e-mail: tstryjek@wp.pl

**Barbara Markowska-Marczak** – historical populism and images of the Second World War in the narrative museums in Central and Eastern Europe; sociologist of culture, memory studies researcher and philosopher; assistant professor in the Institute of Sociology at Collegium Civitas; e-mail: bmarkowska@civitas.edu.pl

**Joanna Konieczna-Salamatin** – values in public life, national identity, and systemic transition in Ukraine, Poland and Eastern Europe; sociologist and social researcher with a passion; associate professor at the Faculty of Sociology, University of Warsaw; e-mail: jkonieczna@uw.edu.pl