

Collaborator: No Longer a Dirty Word?

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The crisis in Ukraine has revealed to the world the divisions that exist throughout Europe about how the Second World War is remembered. Gareth Pritchard and Desislava Gancheva look at the controversial debate around wartime collaboration.

Across swathes of Europe a sustained campaign is now being waged to rehabilitate the memory of individuals and organisations who, during the Second World War, collaborated with the forces of Nazi Germany. This has led to bitter controversies, sometimes between states, sometimes between different political and ethnic groups within states. The rehabilitation of collaborators and war criminals is closely connected to the rise in popularity of extreme nationalist parties, but in some countries it has become a mainstream phenomenon, embraced by governments. It is also linked to the growth of racism and antisemitism in Europe.

The country in which debates about the memory of wartime collaboration are currently most contentious is Ukraine. The most prominent collaborator at the heart of these debates is Stepan Bandera. During the 1940s Bandera was the leader of a radical nationalist party called the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN). Until 1941 he worked closely with the Nazis, but then fell out favour with them shortly after the German invasion of Ukraine. After putting him in a concentration camp for three years, the Nazis renewed their alliance with Bandera in 1944. He survived the war and was eventually killed by KGB agents in Munich in 1959.

In recent years, Bandera has become a rallying symbol for Ukrainian nationalists. In 2010 the then president of Ukraine, Viktor Yushchenko, awarded Bandera the title 'Hero of the Ukraine'. He was stripped of the title by Yushchenko's successor, Viktor Yanukovich. Nonetheless, numerous statues of Bandera have been erected in western Ukraine. Every year, on January 1st, a torchlit parade is held in Kiev to celebrate Bandera's birthday and in 2014 the event was attended by approximately 15,000 people. There have even been attempts to rename Lviv International Airport in Bandera's honour.

Caption: A statue of Stepan Bandera is unveiled in Ukraine

Before 2014 Bandera was little known in the West, but the current crisis in Ukraine has changed that. During the ‘Maidan’ protest movement that toppled Yanukovich, one of the most prominent faces on the demonstrations that took place in Kiev and other cities in western Ukraine was that of Bandera. Photographs and pictures of him were carried frequently by anti-Yanukovich protestors. After taking control of the city hall in Kiev, the demonstrators hung a giant portrait of Bandera in the columned central hall of the building.

Bandera is just one of several controversial individuals and organisations whose memory is celebrated by Ukrainian nationalists. During the protests of January and February 2014, the crowds rallied behind the flags and slogans of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA). During the Second World War the UPA fought against both the occupying Germans and pro-Soviet partisans and then against the Red Army. The UPA also participated in ethnic cleansing and the mass killings of civilians, above all of Jews and Poles. Some Ukrainian nationalists also celebrate the memory of the Galician Division of the Waffen SS, which was established in 1943, units of which also participated in atrocities against Jews and Poles.

Stepan Bandera, the fighters of the UPA and the soldiers of the Galician Division are not seen as heroes by all Ukrainians. Particularly in the Russophone eastern and southern regions of Ukraine, Bandera and other wartime Ukrainian nationalists are regarded as collaborators who murdered thousands of Soviet citizens. The fact that some nationalists in Kiev and western Ukraine openly celebrate his memory is one of the reasons why the post-Yanukovich authorities are viewed with hostility by some people in the Russophone regions. Pro-Russian activists frequently denounce the Ukrainian nationalists as ‘fascists’ and ‘Banderites’.

Conflicting attitudes to the war are also an important reason for the tensions between the post-Yanukovich regime in Kiev and the Russian government. Most Russians still refer to the Second World War as the ‘Great Patriotic War’ and see it as a war of liberation against the Nazi invaders. The memory of the 20 to 30 million Soviet citizens who perished during the war and, in particular, the eight to 13 million Red Army soldiers who were killed, remains sacrosanct. From the point of view of most Russians, Stepan Bandera was a fascist collaborator and the public celebration of his memory is regarded as deeply offensive.

The rehabilitation in Ukraine of Bandera, the OUN, the UPA and the Galician SS Division is part of a much wider phenomenon. In Belgium, for example, the rehabilitation of Flemish wartime collaborators was always a demand popular on the extreme fringes of the Flemish nationalist movement. In 2011, however, all the mainstream Flemish parties – with the sole exception of the Flemish Greens – supported a motion advocating an amnesty for those who collaborated with the Nazis during the occupation of 1940-44. This did not go down well with French-speaking Walloons and their political representatives, who still regard those who collaborated with the Nazis as fascists and traitors.

In Italy some politicians, of whom Silvio Berlusconi is most prominent, have long advocated what they consider a more 'balanced' view of the Fascist regime of Benito Mussolini. In January 2013 there was a high-profile controversy after Berlusconi made a speech in which he said that the Duce had not been as entirely bad as the history books would have us believe. There have also been local controversies on the issue of the Fascist past. In August 2012 a publicly funded mausoleum was opened in Affile near Rome to the memory of Rodolfo Graziani, the Fascist commander. In 2013 the municipal authorities in Brescia decided to restore a Fascist-era statue to its original position. All such attempts to normalise the Fascist past have been denounced by liberal and left-wing politicians, Holocaust survivors and veterans of the Italian partisan movement.

Attempts to restore the public reputation of wartime collaborators are particularly common in the former Communist countries of East-Central Europe, the Balkans and the Baltic. In Latvia, for example, an annual parade is held on March 16th to commemorate the Latvian Legion of the Waffen SS. Though the parade is not an official event, it has been attended by members of the Latvian parliament. In 2012 the President of Latvia, Andris Bērziņš, publicly defended the annual parade. Similar events are held in the two other Baltic states, Estonia and Lithuania. In all three, such commemorations have led to political controversy. Jewish groups have vigorously protested against the celebration of military units that included many men who, before they joined the Waffen SS, were members of nationalist militias that carried out massacres of Jews. Ethnic Russians who live in the Baltic states have also condemned the rehabilitation of collaborators and there have been sharp diplomatic protests from the Kremlin.

Caption: Slovak leader Josef Tiso shakes hands with German foreign minister Ribbentrop as Hitler looks on, East Prussia, 1941.

In Slovakia, the figure at the heart of controversies about the Second World War is Jozef Tiso. A Roman Catholic priest who led a puppet government in Bratislava from 1939 to 1945, Tiso was responsible for the deportation of tens of thousands of Jews to the Nazi death camps. Tiso is viewed with sympathy, even enthusiasm, by many Slovak nationalists. In November 2013 an open admirer of Tiso, Marian Kotleba, became regional governor of the province of Banská Bystrica, after winning 55 per cent of the vote. In 2008 the then Archbishop of Trvana, Ján Sokol, held a mass to commemorate Tiso. Attempts have been made to raise money to turn Tiso's birthplace into a museum and to erect other public monuments in his honour. But Tiso's memory is deeply controversial. The campaign to rehabilitate Tiso is viewed with repugnance by members of Slovakia's Jewish, Hungarian and Roma minorities, as well as left-wing and liberal Slovaks.

Apart from Ukraine, the country in which the rehabilitation of such figures has gone furthest is Hungary. The man whose reputation is at the centre of this process is Miklós Horthy. From March 1920 to October 1944 Admiral Horthy was the self-styled 'regent' of Hungary and the dominant figure in Hungarian politics. An authoritarian nationalist, Horthy imposed a brutal 'white terror' on socialists and communists. He was also a virulent antisemite; in September 1920 Horthy's regime introduced restrictions on the number of Jewish students allowed into universities, Europe's first piece of antisemitic

legislation in the interwar period. Further anti-Jewish laws followed in 1938 and 1939. During the war Horthy was an ally of Hitler and Hungarian troops participated in the invasion of the Soviet Union. In March 1944 Hungary was occupied by the German army but Horthy remained in power. By October 1944, when Horthy was deposed, over 400,000 Hungarian Jews had been deported to the death camps with the active support of the Hungarian state.

Italian foreign minister Count Ciano (left) dines with Hungarian leader Admiral Horthy after a deer shoot at Gödöllő, Hungary, December 1938

In recent years vigorous efforts have been made to portray Horthy as a patriot and a wise statesman, who led Hungary through a difficult period in its history. One of the main groups that is set on rehabilitating him is the extreme nationalist political party, Jobbik. Since 2010, however, Horthy's most powerful patron has been the right-wing government of Victor Orbán. As Nora Berend noted in *History Today* in March 2014, Orbán has thrown the weight of the Hungarian state behind a systematic campaign to manipulate history in order 'to strengthen the ties of national belonging'. Central to this campaign is the rehabilitation of Horthy. Statues of him have been erected in Budapest, Csókakő, Kereki and elsewhere. In 2012 the main square of a town near Budapest was renamed in his honour. The work of Horthy-era writers, including the fascist and war criminal József Nyírő, has been incorporated into the school curriculum. In the official discourse of the Hungarian government, the role of Horthy and of the Hungarian state in the persecution and deportation of Jews is downplayed, while the 'victimhood' of Hungary is stressed.

Though Orbán's doctored version of Hungary's history is popular with sections of the public, it is also deeply divisive. There was a clash between the Hungarian and Romanian governments over plans to bury the remains of József Nyírő near the town of his birth, Jímbor, which was then part of the Kingdom of Hungary but is now located inside the borders of Romania. Jewish organisations, including the World Jewish Congress and the Simon Wiesenthal Centre, have condemned Orbán's historical revisionism, which they see as closely connected to the rise of antisemitism in Hungary. High-profile figures in the arts have also made their feelings known. Imre Kertész, the Nobel prize-winning author and Holocaust survivor, has taken a strong public stance against Orbán's revision of Hungarian history. As a result, Kertész has been vilified by Hungarian nationalists. Elie Wiesel, winner of the 1986 Nobel Peace Prize, returned an award that had been given to him by the Hungarian state as a protest against what he sees as the 'white-washing of a tragic and criminal episode in Hungary's past'. The historian Randolph L. Braham, one of the world's leading authorities on the Holocaust in Hungary, has also strongly condemned the Hungarian government's 'cowardly attempt to detract attention from the Horthy regime's involvement in the destruction of the Jews'.

There are several factors that explain the growth of Second World War revisionism in contemporary Europe, not least the growing popularity of extreme nationalist political parties: as well as Jobbik in Hungary, there is the Attack Party in Bulgaria, Golden Dawn

in Greece and Svoboda in Ukraine, which are often in the forefront of campaigns to rehabilitate wartime collaborators. Their popularity is in turn connected to economic hardship, cynicism about mainstream political elites and increasing racism against ethnic minorities and immigrants. In almost all those countries where there are strong campaigns to rehabilitate collaborators, there has also been a marked increase in racist discourse and racially motivated violence. The group that has suffered most at the hands of extreme right-wing nationalists has been the Roma, but other minority communities – including Jews – have also been targeted.

Yet economic hardship and the rising popularity of extreme nationalism can provide us with only a partial explanation for this phenomenon. In the Belgian region of Flanders, where Second World War revisionism is now mainstream, the Flemish nationalist party Vlaams Belang, which traditionally was the most bellicose advocate of the rehabilitation of wartime collaborators, performed poorly in the federal elections of 2010 and even worse in the local elections of 2012 and the European elections of May 2014. Flanders is not only one of the richest parts of Europe, it is also wealthier than the French-speaking region of Wallonia. Despite the fact that many French-speaking Belgians also collaborated with the Nazis during the occupation, the majority of francophone Belgians – unlike their Flemish compatriots – are opposed to any rehabilitation of wartime collaborators. In Bulgaria, which is the poorest member state of the EU, revisionism of the type seen in Flanders is weaker. Though there is a movement in Bulgaria to rehabilitate 1940s-era collaborators, such as Hristo Lukov, it is limited to the extremist fringe of Bulgarian politics.

An underlying cause of revisionism is the resurgence of radical ethnic nationalism in post-Cold War Europe. At the heart of all nationalisms are national narratives: collective stories about how the nation came into being and what the nation has accomplished. In almost all these narratives, recurring themes are the heroism of the nation (as exemplified in the deeds of particular heroes, usually in the struggle against national enemies) and its victimhood at the hands of other nations. These national narratives are now being rewritten. In East-Central Europe and the Balkans, official Communist interpretations of national histories collapsed with the end of the Cold War and the fall of the pro-Soviet regimes. Ever since, different political and ethnic groups have been competing with each other to determine which historical figures are assigned the role of heroes and which are cast in the role of villains. In some parts of western Europe, rising scepticism about the project of European integration and the concomitant growth of nationalism, have likewise destabilised traditional narratives of the recent past, in particular of the Second World War.

Caption: 'For the Motherland, For Honour, For Freedom', a Soviet propaganda poster of 1941.

In many countries, however, constructing a usable national narrative of the war is problematic, especially for conservative governments. In Hungary, for instance, wartime resistance to the Germans was minimal and collaboration was widespread. In Estonia, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia and Ukraine many people actively resisted the Nazis, but the majority of those who did so fought with the Communist-led partisans or served directly in the ranks of the Red Army. By contrast, nationalists and conservative

elites in the region collaborated actively with the Nazis and in some cases took up arms to fight in German uniforms. The major point of friction everywhere was the ideological divide between those who saw the Soviets as the primary threat and those who regarded the Nazis as their main enemies. However, other ideological factors were also important. Many of the ultra-nationalists who collaborated with the Germans in Croatia, Hungary, Ukraine, the Baltic states and elsewhere were also racists and antisemites, who participated actively in the killing of Jews and other ethnic minorities.

In order to create a usable past, contemporary conservative nationalists need to fashion narratives that both delegitimise the Nazi-resisters on the one hand, while detoxifying the memory of Nazi collaborators on the other. A variety of tactics are employed to this end. One tactic is to deny, minimise or simply ignore the collaboration of wartime nationalists. A second is to vilify those who fought against the Nazis. In Italy, for example, Giampaolo Pansa's book *Il Sangue dei vinti* (Blood of the Losers; 2003), which attacked the heroic idea of the Italian resistance movement, sold 350,000 copies in its first year of publication. In 2008, criminal investigators in Lithuania threatened to take action against two elderly Holocaust survivors, who had escaped the Vilnius ghetto and joined the Soviet-backed partisans. According to the investigators, the pair had been involved in an attack on a village in which civilians had been killed. In 2011 Lithuanian officials demanded that Israeli police investigate an 86-year old Holocaust survivor and former partisan on the grounds that he had 'libelled national heroes'.

The most important tactic of those who seek to rehabilitate collaborators is to argue that Communism and Nazism were both totalitarian and genocidal systems, the crimes of which were equally evil. From this perspective, choosing to fight with the Nazis against the Communists was not necessarily morally worse than choosing (as Roosevelt and Churchill did) to fight with Stalin against Hitler. Under some circumstances, claim revisionists, the decision to make a temporary alliance with the Nazis against the threat of Communism was understandable, even commendable. Revisionists thus argue that the men who served with the Latvian or Galician divisions of the Waffen SS were simply patriots, who allied themselves with the Nazis for patriotic reasons and not out of ideological sympathy. Their goal was simply to defend their countries from invasion by the Red Army. Fighting in German uniforms with German weapons was the only way to do this. Similar arguments have been used by revisionists to exculpate Bandera, Horthy, Tiso and other politicians who sided with the Nazis.

Two academics, Dovid Katz and Danny Ben-Moshe, initiated the 'Seventy Years Declaration on the Anniversary of the Final Solution Conference at Wannsee' in 2012 to protest against attempts by several European states to draw a moral equivalence between the crimes of Nazism and of Communism. The declaration was signed by 70 prominent politicians from across Europe. As we approach the 70th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, the passage of time is making its legacy more – not less – divisive.

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