Between the Holodomor and Euromaidan: In Search of Contemporary Ukrainian National Identity

David Marples, in conversation with Manuel Férez Gil

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Manuel Ferez: *Your study and publications on Russia and Eastern Europe are very extensive. To start the interview, we would like to know how you, a Canadian professor, became interested in these topics.*

David Marples: I have no family background in eastern Europe. My interest began as an undergraduate at the University of London. I had run out of courses for my History degree and opted for a couple at the School of Slavonic Studies. The first was in person on Imperial Russia and the second was a directed study with Dr. Martin McCauley. It sparked my interest in the area, and in the Soviet Union, and I never really looked back. Initially, I moved from the

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UK to Canada to work with a Professor from Ukraine, Ivan Lysiak-Rudnytsky. He introduced me to the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies and its Director, Manoly R. Lupul. Rudnytsky was the supervisor of my MA thesis, and moved me firmly in the direction of Ukraine. I had been advised earlier, however, that our generation was producing too many Russian specialists and that it would be wiser to start to study one of the national republics of the USSR. Ukraine seemed the obvious choice. My PhD supervisor at Sheffield, Everett M. Jacobs, was the most influential figure in my early career, an American from Boston of Jewish background.

M.F.: *Your Ukraine-related publications include three books that I found very important "Understanding Ukraine and Belarus" (2020), "Ukraine in Conflict" (2017) and "Heroes and Villains: Creating National History in Contemporary Ukraine" (2008). I would like to start with the theme of creating the contemporary national history of Ukraine. What are the central elements in this identity? How do you think the Russian invasion and aggression (2014-present) has impacted the development of this Ukrainian national identity?*

D.M.: Ukraine inherited the Soviet legacy and after independence there was no obvious direction either for the teaching of history or understanding the past. For some years, the country's path was ambivalent. By the early 1990s, the Famine of 1933 was already being elevated as an event that defined the identity of modern Ukraine, namely suffering at the hands of a regime based in Moscow. At a conference in Kyiv in 1990, it was referred to as an act of Genocide. Ukrainian focus on the famine had been evident to me from my second visit to Ukraine in 1989. Prior to late 1987, it was officially denied to have happened at all. While such revelations were taking place, independent Ukraine continued to honour the victims and victory of the "Great Patriotic War." Even in 2003 Kharkiv, the History Museum was featuring an exhibition of the Holodomor on one floor and the liberation of the city on the other. School textbooks were equally muddled.

The Famine-Holodomor was gradually elevated to be the most important historical marker for modern Ukraine. The process began under the presidency of Leonid Kuchma, but reached its peak during the 2005–10 presidency of Viktor Yushchenko. The memory of the Famine had been largely preserved by the Ukrainian Diaspora in the West, particularly on its major anniversaries. Western publications, sponsored by Ukrainian institutions, included Robert Conquest's 1986 book *The Harvest of Sorrow* and the collection *Famine in Ukraine*

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1982–83, edited by Roman Serbyn and Bohdan Krawchenko. Yushchenko opened the Holodomor Memorial in Kyiv, which contains books of memory from the affected oblasts of Ukraine and an elaborate monument in the shape of a candle. It stands on the hill overlooking the city, alongside the Great Patriotic War Museum and the Pecherska Lavra monastery.

Yushchenko began a world tour to push the policy of the Ukrainian Famine as a Genocide, which was accepted by some, though far from all Western countries. In 2008, the Ukrainian Parliament accepted the decree on the same topic, but with a bare majority as a large portion of MPs abstained from voting. The focus on the Famine, and with Moscow (and particularly [Joseph] Stalin, [Lazar] Kaganovich and [Viacheslav] Molotov) as the perpetrator placed Russia in the position of "the other" in Ukrainian historical memory. The Russians, including then president Dmitry Medvedev, angrily rejected the theory, arguing that the famine was more widespread than the borders of Ukraine, and had affected equally the Volga Region and (two years earlier) Kazakhstan, at that time part of the Russian Republic.

If the Western Diaspora initiated the campaign and caused it to be rooted in Ukraine itself, it has not remained static. In particular, the Holodomor Research and Education Consortium (HREC), sponsored by Ukrainian businessman James C. Temerty, has been very active in conferences, publications, and school and higher education curricula. Key centres of research are the Ukrainian Research Institute at Harvard University and the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies in Edmonton and Toronto, with programs funded by Temerty. The result to date has probably been "preaching to the converted" though the publication of the book *Red Famine* by Anne Applebaum in 2017 may also have been influential among Western readers. Whatever its benefits, HREC is a political entity that adheres to a certain view of the famine and for that reason I have reservations about its influence.

The choice of the Famine as the foundation stone of modern Ukraine signified that national suffering with Ukrainians as victims was more important than national achievements. The choice of the name Holodomor (death by hunger) was similar to that of the Holocaust, the destruction of European Jews during the Second World War, which was the obvious marker for comparison. Yushchenko led the way in inflating the number of famine victims to 7 and then 10 million–current research conducted by demographers suggests that the most likely figure was 3.9 million on the territories that comprised Ukraine in 1991. Thus, at the level of state propaganda, the Holodomor resulted in more victims than the number of Jews who died in the Holocaust, the event that

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largely defined the word Genocide. It was a rewriting of the past that reached a new level in the "cult of competitive suffering."

While the Famine has been a divisive issue in Ukrainian-Russian relations, it is not the only event in the 20th century to have escalated tensions decades later. The legacy of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) continues to elicit widespread debate as to their impact on modern Ukraine and place in national identity building. I described the discussions among scholars in my book *Creating National History in Contemporary Ukraine*, and concluded that they were fruitful and well informed. Unfortunately, however, the topic of extreme Ukrainian nationalism became heavily politicized well before Russia attacked Ukraine in 2022.

First, however, a little background for the reader. The OUN was founded in 1929 in interwar Poland, on the roots of the Ukrainian Military Organization. Noted for extremist actions against Polish officials in the heavily Ukrainian populated region of southeastern Poland, it split into two wings in 1940: an older group under Andrii Melnyk and a younger one under Stepan Bandera. Though both played roles during the Second World War, it is the OUN-B that has been the focus in recent times. Bandera himself played a peripheral role during the war, spending most of the time under arrest in the German concentration camp at Sachsenhausen near Berlin, but he has remained a symbol for the far-right in modern-day Ukraine. In the Ukrainian Diaspora, he remains a controversial but influential figure.

In October 1942, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army was founded during the German occupation of Poland. Led by OUN member Roman Shukhevych, who had played a role in the German auxiliary police in occupied Ukraine and Belarus, it carried out ethnic cleansing of millions of Poles the following spring in Volhynia. After the Soviet army advanced into the western regions of Ukraine, UPA carried out a desperate battle to prevent the reestablishment of Soviet rule that lasted into the late 1940s and early 1950s. Shukhevych was killed in a skirmish with Soviet security forces near Lviv in 1950.

About the time *Creating National History* was published, Yushchenko made both Bandera and Shukhevych "heroes of Ukraine." The move represented a belated attempt to restore their popularity toward the end of a fairly disastrous presidency and was reversed after the 2010 presidential elections when Viktor Yanukovych was victorious. Neither that election or the various parliamentary elections suggested that extreme nationalism of the OUN variant had much influence in Ukraine by 2010. More important is the intervention of the state in historical memory and identity building. The Famine and the OUN

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had been advanced as two platforms offering yardsticks to follow. For Bandera and Shukhevych, Communism was the enemy and Ukrainian independence the goal. The fact that neither played a role in the latter's eventual attainment was largely forgotten. This focus on the 20th century was aways going to be divisive. Ukraine slowly began to reject its Soviet-era identity but the question with what to replace it was a difficult one.

M.F.: *Among the recent events that happened in Ukraine, the EuroMaidan revolution is undoubtedly one of the most important. You published with Frederick Mills "Ukraine´s Euromaidan: Analyses of a Civil Revolution in Ukraine", in that sense could you share your perspective on what happened on Maidan and how it has been incorporated into the Ukrainian national narrative.*

D.M.: The uprising that began in Kyiv's Maidan in November 2013 went through several phases that were not always closely related. It began as a protests against President Yanukovych's decision not to sign an Association Agreement with the European Union. That stage lasted until the end of November. Initially, support was very broad, and the demonstration was peaceful, but it was broken up by force on the night of November 30 and December 1, and thereafter a new stage began.

The second stage incorporated a lot of elements: in general, there was disgust as the overt corruption of the Yanukovych government and that of the president personally. On January 1, there was a large march through the Maidan to commemorate the birth of Stepan Bandera, the OUN leader, which symbolized perhaps that the far-right was taking a more active role. By early 2014, Russian-speaking nationalists of the Right Sector had joined in. Some protesters were armed, but the majority remained peaceful. In February, the confrontation between the Maidan protesters and the Berkut police on the government side became more violent. It culminated in the shooting of demonstrators by snipers, operating from the roofs of surrounding buildings. No definitive identification of these snipers has ever surfaced.

Euromaidan became known as the "Revolution of Dignity" and those who died as martyrs for the cause of a Ukraine moving away from Russia and the Soviet era. Support for the uprising divided Ukrainian society. It was heavily backed by western Ukraine and most of Kyiv, but opposed in the east and parts of the south. It ended with the departure of Yanukovych and the election of a new government. It was not the first such mass protest in the Maidan but it was the most decisive. The Orange Revolution was not a revolution in the sense

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that it did not replace the government or the existing structure. Russia's choice, Yanukovych duly became president in the next election in 2010. But in 2014, the protesters rejected the mediation of Europeans and the ruling Regions Party dissolved. Everything would be different thereafter. It was a decisive change.

M.F.: *What are the effects of Euromaidan on the Ukrainian society?*

D.M.: After Euromaidan, Ukraine was at war. Crimea was annexed by Russia, and Russian-backed governments took over parts of the Donbas region, including the two major cities Donetsk and Luhansk. Russia had not formally invaded these regions but backed them materially and with weapons. They survived Ukraine's "Anti-Terrorist Operation" (ATO) of the summer of 2014 solely because of Russian support. In 2015, Ukraine issued four Memory Laws, which outlawed the Communist Party and several other far left parties. Communist symbols were banned, and the names of towns, streets, and smaller settlements derived from the Soviet era were changed to more appropriate Ukrainian names.

Perhaps most seriously, one of the laws made it an offence to denigrate the dignity of "fighters for Ukraine of the 20th century," with a list of names that included Bandera and Shukhevych. All those who had worked for the Soviet structure were excluded, including even those who had brought about Ukraine's declaration of independence in 1991, such as the first president Leonid Kravchuk. Lenin statues had been mostly toppled during the Euromaidan protests. Those remaining were now removed as well as statues to other figures of the Communist era. An anti-corruption committee was established. Within a few years, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church declared independence from its Moscow counterpart. The army was also gradually reformed and more decisively separated from its Soviet era, severing links between Ukrainian and Russian officers.

One should not exaggerate changes to the political structure or in removing corruption. Ukraine's first post-Maidan president was an oligarch and one of the co-founders of the Regions Party, Petro Poroshenko. Though he espoused the new principles and adopted nationalist rhetoric, he did not separate himself from his business or embark on a radical policy to eliminate corruption in society. Ukraine became poorer in the period 2014–19, replacing Moldova as Europe's poorest country. But the outer appearance of society changed, the gap between Ukraine and Russia widened. Armed nationalist groups were initially

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purged and then allowed to roam the streets of Kyiv and other cities. Some attacked LGBT parades and gypsy camps.

The divisions in society remained. Petty scandals occupied society. Ukraine was becoming more democratic but there were deep scars. Prospects for joining the EU receded as a result of the corruption, and there was no consensus on NATO membership. But the outer appearance was transformed.

M.F.: *Ukraine, its history, culture and identity, has occupied a rather marginal space in the curricula of Latin American universities. Current events drew the world's attention to Ukraine. As an expert on Ukraine, how to approach Ukraine without falling into the sensationalism of the media and in a way that allows us to place it in a broader perspective: democratization, Europeanization and liberalization of the post-Soviet space.*

D.M.: First of all, Ukraine needs to be removed from the neo-colonial Russian context and treated as a separate entity with its own history and culture. Ukrainians have clearly been recognized as an ethnic group meriting their own state for the past century, and they were the largest group not to receive their own state from the Paris Peace Treaties that ended the First World War in 1918. By numbers alone, a country of over 40 million people merits individual scrutiny.

Second, Ukraine has a rich, multicultural history that needs to be examined beyond its ethnic context. For much of its history, the lands that make up Ukraine today were part of foreign empires and controlled from outside Kyiv or Kharkiv (or for that matter, Lviv). Thanks to a very active Diaspora, there is a tendency for world governments to look at Ukraine from a very western Ukrainian or Galician perspective, with overemphasis on Ukrainian nationalism and the "heroes" of the Second World War. Such stress does not reflect Ukraine as a whole, as reflected in the 2019 election that brought Volodymyr Zelensky to power. Most Ukrainians want democracy, but they also support moderation and toleration. They struggled in part because of the longevity of the Communist legacy that resulted in former Communists occupying high offices for so many years: Kravchuk, Kuchma, and others. Ukrainians are an integral part of Europe. They always have been. Possibly the roots of East Slavic states like Russia and Belarus can be traced back to the Kyiv state of the tenth century. It is still debated. But by the 21st century, there were clear differences between Ukraine and its east Slavic neighbours.

The third point pertains to academia. For generations, scholars focused on Russia and believed that by studying Russia they understood Ukraine. It is a

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fallacy. Thanks to social media, many experts on Russia are today expressing their views on Ukraine as a closely related entity. The war in Ukraine is considered by some as a "local" Russian affair. There is no understanding of the separate evolution of Ukraine, its traditions and culture, outside the general milieu of Greater Russia. Likewise, there is no recognition among such scholars of Ukrainian sovereignty and right to pursue its own path. Instead, they speak of the follies of NATO expansion, or the machinations of the United States as causes of the current war – following directly the rhetoric of Vladimir Putin and Sergei Lavrov.

It will take a generation to eradicate such influences despite the fact that self-determination of nations was one of the original Wilsonian principles in which post-First World War settlements were elaborated. None of this is to suggest that Ukraine does not have problems or is a unified society. It does and they have not been nullified by the war, but they need not be the prime focus while Ukraine is being subjected to such barbarities during the Russian assault.

M.F.: *The book you edited entitled "The War in Ukraine's Donbas. Origins, Contexts, and the Future" has just been published. It seems to me a very important issue that must be addressed beyond the politicized narratives established by Russia and her propaganda and understand the Donbas within the Ukrainian processes. Please tell us a little about the book and why it is important for the readers to approach this topic through serious and academic publications like yours.*

D.M.: The book arose from a conference I organized at the University of Alberta. I realized that there were wide disparities among scholars as to why war developed in the Donbas and that in many ways the area is quite different from other regions of Ukraine. Even in the Soviet period there was a distinct Donbas identity that is neither Ukrainian nor Russian. I gathered about 20 scholars, including some local ones, with others from Ukraine, United States, Japan, and Russia. Not everyone I invited could come, but the selection was ideal. We covered Euromaidan and its aftermath, the start of the war, the Donetsk People's Republic, refugees and displaced persons, economic issues, and some suggestions for ways to end the war.

Today, much of our information about the world comes from social media. But it has meant that many non-experts gain a voice, and some of them have little knowledge of the subject area. I think the chapters in this book are all offered by scholars from the area or with a deep understanding of the Don-

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bas. The book avoids polemics and propaganda and explains how the Donbas war originated and why it has lasted so long. I accepted the premise that Russia played a major role but argued that it was not the only factor in explaining the protracted conflict. Certain conditions existed that made separatism more likely. And there was the recent memory of Yanukovych, the former governor of the region, who filled his Cabinet with appointees from Donetsk in the government of 2010. There are so many corroborating elements: declining industries, mafia gangs, corruption, political clans, and the like.

M.F.: *It is difficult and irresponsible to predict what will happen with the Russian war and invasion of Ukraine, but it would be interesting if you could tell us what the post-conflict scenarios could be not only for the future of Ukraine but for that of Russia, its civil societies and political elites.*

D.M: It is difficult for sure. I should say at the outset that I consider the attack on Ukraine to be the greatest mistake of Putin's political career. It was poorly thought out and the army was ill prepared for the drive on Kyiv. The war has cost Russia dearly. If Russia loses the war and is forced to give up its occupied territories in the south (excluding Crimea) and the east, then I think it will cost Putin his position as president. At worst, it could lead to separatist movements within the Russian Federation and the disintegration of the state. But let is consider some possibilities.

a) A stalemate situation mediated by foreign powers such as Turkey and Israel would weaken Ukraine and lead to the loss of further territories to Russia. It would not preclude further wars and any future Ukrainian government based on such mediation would be weak and short-lived. The future of the Ukrainian state would always be in doubt and post-Putin Russia governments would likely try to expand occupied territories in the future.
b) A complete Russian victory is unlikely as long as Ukraine is backed by Western powers with weapons and credits. But Putin could complete the occupation of the Donbas and then seek an armistice on the grounds that Russia had achieved its main goals. In turn, a settlement based on these acquisitions would bring down the current Ukrainian government. Russia in my view would need to step up conscription and change its current dependence on raw recruits and career soldiers, co-opted from the poorest strata of society, particularly from non-Russian republics. The existence of the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics increases the chances

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of success along these lines. Like a) above, this outcome would create huge problems for the future of the Ukrainian state.

c) A complete Ukrainian victory may be the most unlikely outcome given the comparative weakness of Ukraine compared to Russia, and the wide disparity in numbers and resources. But it is the only outcome that could offer the possibility of a lengthy period of peace for Europe. Ukraine would regain all the territories it possessed in 1991, with the exception of Crimea. I can think of no obvious way Ukraine could retake Crimea without a navy of any size and with Russia controlling the Black Sea. And it may not be a desired outcome anyway, since Crimea is a difficult appendage that requires a constant supply of water and food. Moreover, the Russian presence in Crimea precludes any easy integration within Ukraine. It was provided as a symbolic gift by the Russian Republic in 1954 with no anticipation that Ukraine would gain independence less than four decades later. One could argue that it is also not part of Russia given its Tatar (not to mention Greek) heritage, but Russians make up most of the population. Thus, my recommendation to Ukraine in the event of a complete land victory would be to relinquish Crimea on a permanent basis.

In the event that Russian forces are driven out of Ukraine, then I think Ukraine will need significant help to rebuild its towns and villages destroyed by missiles and warfare. It will also require more protection than it gained in 1994 when it gave up its nuclear weapons. Ultimately, that protection would require NATO membership. It is as vulnerable as the Baltic States, for example.

On a global level, changes need to be made to the United Nations, which has proved powerless in the event of a major 21st century European war. The Security Council cannot remain in its present form since there is no possibility of preventing a Russian veto, just as in the past the United States and China could also limit its functioning during international crises in which they played key roles. I don't think it should be abolished. It is the only such body in place. But a Security Council based on the victors of the Second World War no longer makes sense. A rotation between major nations makes more sense but one would need to determine how to define the word "major."

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