



Ukraine's Memory Palace

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On a leafy street in the Ukrainian capital, just steps from the ornate building that houses the country's parliament, sits what is perhaps the nation's most powerful weapon in its protracted battle of ideas with Russia. There, tucked away in a once beautiful tsarist-era building, are the offices of the Ukrainian National Memory Institute. It is a tiny government agency with a massive mandate: to counter decades of Russian intellectual disinformation.

Officially, the institute's mission is to help Ukraine overcome the legacy of totalitarianism endemic to former communist regimes. The goal is an essential one, since the Soviet Union rewrote the national history of its constituent parts during the decades of the Cold War. In doing so, it suppressed the national identities and subverted the rich cultures of the countries it dominated. Reclaiming the national narrative has therefore been a key priority in many post-Soviet states; in Poland, Romania, and elsewhere, a growing coalition of like-minded groups has taken up the mission of remembrance.

But Ukraine's National Memory Institute is unique, because it is carrying out its work in a country that now finds itself once again at war with Russia. The past year and a half have seen Ukrainian forces successfully stall Russia's military advance into eastern Ukraine, only to be confronted by a massive Russian campaign of political subversion targeted at the country's business sector and its political class.

This has added urgency to the Ukrainian government's efforts, begun after 2013's Maidan revolution, to root out the pervasive Russian influence that permeated post-Soviet Ukrainian society in the form of, among other things, massive intelligence penetration, corrupt politicians, and clandestine economic holdings. Over the past year, the government of President Petro Poroshenko has launched far-reaching reforms of the police and security services, begun revamping the country's educational system, and kicked off a campaign to teach more Ukrainians the English language as a way of providing them greater opportunities in the West.

On the ground, meanwhile, it has begun to tackle the question of history in earnest, including by opening previously closed KGB archives and changing the Soviet-era names of roads and monuments. Thus, pursuant to a May 2015 law, thousands of Ukrainian streets named after Marx, Lenin, and hundreds of other Soviet public figures will be renamed by late November. Such steps, Ukrainian officials maintain, are essential to keep the country independent from Russia. And the institute, with its focus on education and transparency, plays an important part in this reorientation.

Perhaps of greatest importance, however, is the institute's work in countering a vestige of the distant past: Soviet mythology surrounding World War II. The Kremlin's preferred narrative suppresses any mention of Soviet aggression, abuses, or treachery during the course of that conflict. It posits the Soviet state as the world's sole defense against fascism.

Echoes of this narrative reverberate in Russia's current conflict with Ukraine. In the Russian conception, Ukraine today represents a fascist state—and Russian state media have expended enormous effort to paint the country in this light, despite mountains of empirical evidence to the contrary. Russian President Vladimir Putin, for example, has justified his February 2014 annexation of Crimea as an effort to rescue the territory from Ukrainian brownshirts, while Kremlin-controlled outlets like Sputnik News have given extensive coverage to Ukraine's far-right fringe, despite the minuscule percentage of the Ukrainian body politic that these forces actually represent.

The institute's response has been an ongoing campaign of education designed to put Soviet conduct during what Russians call the "Great Patriotic War" in its proper context. Last month, as part of this effort, it launched a prominent billboard display in front of the Kiev Town Hall highlighting the true scope of both Nazi and Soviet brutality in Ukraine during the conflict.

The objective, however, isn't simply to revisit the past; it is also to shape Ukraine's future. "Only when countries have a full reckoning of their totalitarian past can they transition to full democracy," explains Volodymyr Viatrovykh, the young, energetic historian who serves as the institute's director. "Those that choose not to, like Belarus, have succumbed to totalitarian revanchism."

The message is clear. Those who don't remember history are doomed to repeat it. The corollary is that those who refuse to reckon with the past will inevitably be held captive to it. This is a lesson that Ukraine has learned at great cost. Russia, however, still has not. But here, Viatrovykh holds out hope. "By changing Ukraine," he believes, "we will change Russia as well," because frustrating Russia's imperial ambitions will inevitably spur self-reflection among the country's captive populace.

In this context, the war in Ukraine is one of national identity, not only for Ukraine but for Russia as well. And the key to winning it lies in remembering.