

Book Review: Grzegorz Rossolinski-Liebe, *Stepan Bandera: The Life and Afterlife of a Ukrainian Nationalist. Fascism, Genocide, and Cult*. Stuttgart: *ibidem*-Verlag, 2014.

Raul Cârstocea*

European Centre for Minority Issues

As the title suggests, Grzegorz Rossoliński-Liebe's monograph is a vast and comprehensive biography of Stepan Bandera, spanning more than a century and providing a much-needed *longue durée* perspective that not only reconstructs Bandera's life and political activity in painstaking detail, but also illuminates the reasons for the resurgence of his cult in the late 1980s and especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the achievement of Ukrainian independence. However, the book is also much more than that, covering some of the most sensitive aspects of modern Ukrainian history. It provides detailed accounts of the history of the two organisations with which Bandera was associated during his lifetime – the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) – as well as of their legacies in contemporary Ukraine. These histories are placed in the wider context of the connections and entanglements of Ukrainian nationalists not only with neighbouring countries, but also with similar movements and the two fascist regimes in Europe. It is also a very timely book considering the contested nature of these aspects of modern Ukrainian history and their central role in the debates concerning historical memory in the country, brought to the fore in 2015 by the adoption of a package of four laws collectively known as 'decommunisation laws'. These laws have been widely contested by

* Senior Research Associate. Email: raul.carstocea@ecmi.de.

scholars, as well as by international organisations ranging from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) to the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Council of Europe (CoE).¹ In addition to concerns about the limits to freedom of expression and of the media that the laws introduced, one of them explicitly includes within the scope of its protection the OUN and UPA,² two organisations responsible for collaboration with the Nazis, anti-Jewish pogroms and assistance in the perpetration of the Holocaust in Ukraine, and the mass murder of Poles in Volhynia and eastern Galicia between 1943 and 1945. In turn, these aspects of Ukrainian history acquire special significance for contemporary politics in the context of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, as well as of the so-called ‘information war’ waged by the Russian Federation, where the association of the post-Maidan Ukrainian state with ‘fascism’ is a central component. For understanding the intricate dynamics of the resurgence of the ‘Bandera cult’, of its mixed reception in different parts of Ukraine and among different segments of the population, as well as the complex historical background prompting such associations and their contestation today, Rossoliński-Liebe’s book represents an essential contribution.

The Introduction sets out the main objectives of the study, as well as acknowledging its limitations. The latter are very important to note in view of the contemporary significance of the book, as they explain the detailed treatment of the OUN and UPA at the expense of “other nationalist, democratic, conservative, and communist organisations and parties” in interwar Ukraine (p. 48), and allow the reader to carefully consider and place due weight upon this particular focus. Perhaps providing more contextual information concerning these ‘other’ Ukrainian parties would however have been useful for the reader unfamiliar with the intricacies of the history of the Ukrainians during the interwar period. This is especially so with regard to the UNDO (Ukrainian National Democratic Alliance), about which we learn that it was “the largest party in the Second Republic, which aimed to achieve a Ukrainian state by legal means” and that “there was informal cooperation between the OUN and the right-wing faction of the UNDO” (p. 67), yet not what this cooperation entailed. The author also introduces the theoretical framework associated with some of the main concepts around which the book is structured (such as those of ‘fascism’, ‘genocide’, and ‘cult’ making up the book’s subtitle, as well as related ones), situates this first scholarly biography of Stepan Bandera in the context of the existing literature on related subjects, and explores the extensive documentary sources on which the study is based. Ranging from documents located in numerous archives the author consulted in Poland, Ukraine, Germany, and the Russian

Federation, as well as in the archives of the USHMM and Yad Vashem, through eyewitness testimonies of Holocaust survivors, to hagiographic and apologetic accounts of the activities of Bandera published by members of Ukrainian nationalist organisations or sympathetic historians, the presentation of the sources shows not only their variety and impressive scope, but also the author's skilfulness in combining victim and perpetrator accounts, while carefully considering the relative validity of different categories of sources and the inherent biases associated with each category (e.g. records of interrogations involving various degrees of coercion). The same careful consideration of the sources and the existing literature is visible throughout the different sections of the book – dealing respectively with the interwar period, World War II, the activities of Bandera and OUN members in exile during the Cold War, or the 'return to Ukraine' after the collapse of communism – with the author consistently providing valuable commentary on the relevant historiography (as, for example, in the section entitled 'The Bandera Cult in Historiography', pp. 469-480).

The first chapter introduces a *longue durée* perspective that allows a suitable contextualisation of interwar Ukrainian nationalism, including a brief account of the failed struggle to achieve statehood at the end of World War I and an exploration of the ideological roots of the extreme version of nationalism that would become characteristic of the OUN. The analysis of the particular policies affecting the Ukrainians living in four different states (the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, Poland, Romania, and Czechoslovakia) during the interwar period is very important for understanding the particularities of Ukrainian nationalism, as well as its development in conjunction with and as a response to the assimilationist tendencies of the Second Polish Republic. Poland's treatment of the significant number of national minorities living on its territory as second-class citizens and its flouting of the international obligations adopted as part of the Little Treaty of Versailles, consistently resented and eventually unilaterally renounced by the Polish authorities in 1934, appear as root causes of the antagonism felt by many Ukrainians towards the Polish state, and consequently of their orientation towards a revisionist Nazi Germany (pp. 61-67). As with other cases of ethnic groups dissatisfied with their status in the interwar period and with aspirations for statehood (e.g. Croats in Yugoslavia, Slovaks in Czechoslovakia), a combination of ideological affinities with pragmatic self-interest in the undermining of the post-Versailles order in the hope of achieving independence appears to account for the development of significant far right or fascist organisations and for their collaboration with Fascist Italy and / or Nazi Germany (see p. 197).

In this respect, the chapters that deal with Bandera's 'formative years' and interwar political activity, including the detailed accounts of the OUN trials in Warsaw and Lviv following the most high-profile assassination carried out by the OUN, that of Polish Interior Minister Bronisław Pieracki, represent excellent examples of the author's stepping beyond nationally-focused narratives. He examines not only the complex cross-border functioning of the OUN between the homeland executive – for which Bandera acted first as propaganda director (1931-1933) and then leader (1933-1934) – and its leadership in exile, but also the multiple interactions and entanglements of the Ukrainian nationalists with other fascist and far right groups in Europe, as well as with the two established fascist regimes in Italy and Germany. After tracing the formative influences that other Ukrainian nationalists, including his father, had on Bandera, Rossoliński-Liebe shows how his leadership contributed in turn to an escalation of the violence and acts of terror committed by the OUN, although, as the author claims, this might have been also a case of "reciprocal radicalisation" because other "zealous nationalists as Shukhevych, Lenkavs'kyi, Lebed', and Stets'ko [...] all came into the homeland executive at about the same time as Bandera" (p. 101). In any case, the trials following Pieracki's assassination are examined in much more detail than any of the numerous instances of violence, from robberies to assassinations, carried out by the OUN during the period in question. This is partly due to limitations of documentary evidence indicating Bandera's direct involvement in some of these cases, acknowledged by the author and related to the underground, conspiratorial functioning of the OUN in Poland; and partly to the importance of the trials in establishing Bandera's reputation as a leader of the OUN, not only within the Ukrainian community but also internationally.

The two chapters dealing with the history of World War II in Ukraine are perhaps the best in the entire book and the point at which the narrative truly comes into its own. With the attention to detail that characterises the entire study, Rossoliński-Liebe, primarily a historian of the Holocaust in Eastern and Central Europe, meticulously documents the plans of the OUN for a "Ukrainian National Revolution", its preparation, as well as its abortive yet murderous implementation following the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union. For a movement that believed its most important objective, the achievement of Ukrainian statehood, could only occur in the course of a revolution (p. 167), the catastrophe of World War II and the demise of the Second Polish Republic as a result of the double invasion by German and Soviet forces, as well as the establishment of the puppet states of 'independent' Slovakia and Croatia with German and Italian support, seemed to provide the opportunity to accomplish its goals. The

latter, as elaborated in a document entitled “The Struggle and Activities of the OUN in Wartime”, entailed the establishment of the “totalitarian power of the Ukrainian nation in the Ukrainian territories” (p. 181). With regards to the important question of non-Ukrainian ‘minorities’, the latter were divided according to a simple dichotomy of friends (other ethnic groups opposed to the Soviet Union) and enemies: “Muscovites [Russians], Poles, and Jews”, where the latter would be “destroyed in the struggle” (p. 181).

Following the split of the OUN into a faction led by Andrii Mel’nyk (OUN-M) and a faction led by Bandera (OUN-B), partly “the result of a disagreement between generations” (p. 173), it was the latter that had a more established presence in Western Ukraine and therefore the one that took the initiative in June 1941, adding another chapter to the growing Bandera myth. In the confusion that followed the invasion of the Soviet Union and in the context of the German refusal to acknowledge the proclamation of Ukrainian independence, it was the destruction of its ‘enemies’ that seems to have been the OUN-B’s main activity, the result of an ideology that had been predicated throughout the interwar period on its radical opposition to the Soviet Union and ethnic Russians, to Poland and ethnic Poles, and to Jews as allegedly associated with both. From anti-Jewish pogroms starting days after the attack on the Soviet Union, first in Lviv and later in numerous other localities in Western Ukraine, to the hunting and murder of Jews throughout the period of 1941-1945, and to the mass murder by the OUN and UPA of between 70,000 and 100,000 ethnic Poles in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia in 1943-1945 (p. 271), the narrative provides considerable evidence pertaining to the war crimes committed by Ukrainian nationalists. As Rossoliński-Liebe asserts, Bandera’s “personal, as opposed to moral, responsibility for those murders was either very limited or non-existent” (p. 281), since the leader of the OUN-B was not in Ukraine during the war, being detained in Germany together with other Eastern European fascist leaders (such as the remaining leadership of the legionary movement in Romania) as a ‘reserve’ of potential collaborators until the end of the war. As was the case with other native fascist movements in Central and Eastern Europe, the OUN’s intransigent radical nationalism and commitment to their own cause rendered them unlikely allies for the Nazis, who preferred to cooperate with more moderate nationalists, conservatives who both were more predictable and more susceptible to German influence. Similar to the legionary movement in Romania or the Arrow Cross in Hungary, Germany’s links to the OUN were re-activated only in 1944, when the course of the war led the Nazis to seek out the only partners for cooperation still available, among the fanatical ultra-nationalists, anti-communists and anti-Semites they had previously shunned.

Despite the author's insistence on acknowledging his quasi-exclusive focus on the crimes committed by the OUN and UPA, as the two organisations associated with Bandera, at the expense of those perpetrated either by Nazi Germany or the Ukrainian police, by the Red Army, or by the Polish Home Army in its retaliation against the mass murder of Poles by the UPA, and in the absence of limited information beyond some dry figures related to the number of victims, the narrative necessarily appears rather one-sided and requires considerable knowledge on the part of the reader about the Holocaust in Ukraine to fill in the missing pieces of information. While it is difficult to imagine how this could have been avoided given the purpose of the book, which is to provide a biography of Bandera and the organisations he led in the course of his lifetime, the picture of Ukrainians as "both victims and perpetrators" in the course of World War II is significantly inclined towards the latter. Moreover, despite the acknowledgment of several factors other than "the nationalist and racist ideology of the OUN-B" that help explain the transformation of "ordinary men and women into murderers" (p. 279), some of these, such as the absence of a "strong administration in these territories at a time when the front was changing" (p. 280) are insufficiently explored, despite their proven significance in the history of the Holocaust (Snyder, 2012).

The chapters dealing with the activities of Bandera, the OUN, and the UPA during the Cold War paint a familiar picture to historians of far right and fascist movements in Central and Eastern Europe, one of armed resistance to the Soviet authorities in Western Ukraine and of collaboration with Western (in the case of Bandera, American, British, and later West German) intelligence services in exile. In the framework of organisations such as the Anti-Bolshevik Bloc of Nations (ABN), established by OUN members in exile and including fascists and former Nazi collaborators from across Central and Eastern Europe (Rossoliński-Liebe mentions Slovak, Croatian and Romanian fascists among its ranks), numerous persons guilty of war crimes found protection and vital financial support from Western governments and intelligence services as potential assets that could be used against the Soviet Union. However, an interesting difference between Ukrainian nationalists and their counterparts in other countries in Central and Eastern Europe (the case of Romanian legionaries, for example), concerns their very early attempts at whitewashing their reputation and minimising their role in the mass murder of Jews and other civilians, complete with the OUN's leadership denial of "its engagement in fascist politics before and during the Second World War" as early as May 1945 (p. 317). Despite such statements, the author's analysis of Bandera's post-war writings indicate a continuity with his pre-war far-right views, moderated only partly by

his precarious position as an émigré and target of the Soviet Union and his interest in cooperating with Western governments.

At the same time, Soviet propaganda, to which Rossoliński-Liebe dedicates a comprehensive chapter, contributed significantly, despite its intentions, to the propagation and strengthening of the Bandera cult. According to a pattern familiar also in other countries of the Soviet bloc, the exaggerations, simplifications, and distortions involved in the propagandistic presentation of the crimes committed by the OUN and UPA, coupled with the complete denial of Soviet violence against Ukrainian civilians – many of whom “neither belonged to the nationalist underground, nor supported it” (p. 316) – eventually undermined their intended function. The depictions of Ukrainian nationalists as instruments of Nazi policy (according to the trope of ‘Ukrainian-German nationalists’) prevailing in the course of the war and in the immediate post-war period, followed by the subsequent identification of the OUN and UPA as “Ukrainian bourgeois nationalists” (p. 383) not only flew in the face of considerable evidence to the contrary, but distorted historical facts according to ideological dogma and contributed to obscuring the native roots of the Ukrainian far right. Together with an emphasis on the cooperation of Ukrainian nationalists in exile with Western governments and agencies – as well as more implausible descriptions of the Greek Catholic Church in Ukraine “as an agent of the Vatican, the German Empire, and Nazi Germany” (p. 379) – and the straightforward association of the term ‘fascist’ with the democratic capitalist states in the Western bloc, these features not only made historical memory into an explicitly political and crude propaganda tool, but also contributed to a dilution of the concrete connotation of terms such as ‘fascism’, whose indiscriminate application eventually rendered it almost meaningless within the Soviet bloc (and perhaps beyond). In the context of a regime resented by a significant part of the population and of a one-sided version of history that did not allow any alternative readings, most of all with regards to the crimes committed by the Soviet regime, it is less surprising that in Ukraine, as in other countries of Central and Eastern Europe, this contributed to a rehabilitation of the members of far right and fascist movements in the eyes of the public, turning them “into martyrs and anti-Soviet heroes” (p. 405). Bandera’s assassination by the KGB in 1959, and the numerous commemorations organised by the Ukrainian diaspora in Western Europe and North America also contributed to his representation as an anti-communist ‘martyr’ for the independence of Ukraine.

The different elements contributing to the Bandera cult mentioned in the course of the book, many of them having little to do with his actual activity and much more with his image or

perception within the Ukrainian nationalist organisations, at home and in exile, as well as with Soviet propaganda, lay the basis for a better understanding of the final chapter, which deals with the public resurgence of the cult towards the end of the 1980s and especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union. While some features are yet again common across the countries of the former Soviet bloc – with many of the interwar fascists and extreme nationalists being recuperated in the context of an anti-communist agenda, not only by newly emerging far-right organisations but also by the political mainstream – it is the sheer magnitude of the Bandera cult and its legitimisation in the public domain that appear striking in post-Soviet Ukraine. While certain (mostly marginal) individuals and organisations have occasionally attempted to rehabilitate interwar and wartime characters such as Codreanu, Szálasi, or Pavelić, Horthy, Tiso, or Antonescu, nowhere in Eastern Europe was this phenomenon so widespread or so mainstream as in contemporary Ukraine, nor were such cults so closely linked to state institutions, culminating in Bandera’s designation as ‘Hero of Ukraine’ in 2010 by the Ukrainian President Viktor Iushchenko (p. 506). At the same time, the variety of forms taken by the Bandera cult – in “politics, historiography, museums, novels, movies, monuments, street names, political events, music festivals, pubs, food, stamps, talk shows” (p. 459) – is also unparalleled anywhere in the Soviet bloc.

Rossoliński-Liebe’s excellent account of the resurgence of the Bandera cult in post-Soviet Ukraine does not, however, slide into the common misperception, instrumentalised also by Russian media, that sees it as a fundamental component of contemporary Ukrainian identity as such. Instead, his attention to detail allows for a much more nuanced picture to emerge, one that is sensitive to the differences in its geographical spread – while carefully avoiding a too-straightforward distinction between ‘Western’ and ‘Eastern’ Ukraine, and pointing instead to resistance of local authorities to the Bandera cult even in parts of Western Ukraine (p. 493) – as well as to its changing fortunes under different administrations in the period since 1991. As such, this well-argued chapter, as well as the entire book, contributes significantly to dispelling some of the frequently-invoked readings of such variations as indicative of some ‘inherent’ differences between Eastern and Western Ukraine linked to ethnicity or language, showing instead how the different historical evolutions of the provinces making up present-day Ukraine have concrete and considerable effects on the contemporary political attitudes of the public towards such sensitive issues as Ukrainian nationalism, Stepan Bandera, the OUN and the UPA. These are properly contextualised by the attention devoted also to the monuments and commemorations of the victims of these organisations, as well as followed

across the border into neighbouring Poland, where a particular type of Polish martyrology has developed with regards to the memory of the crimes committed against Poles by Ukrainian nationalists during World War II, against the background of the policy of reconciliation between Poland and Ukraine after 1991 (pp. 516-519).

The picture that emerges from the last chapter, rather than of a monolithic Bandera cult, is that of the polarisation of Ukrainian society with regards to his legacy. This leads the author to the rather bleak conclusion that “up to the time of writing, an approach to the Ukrainian past that would not extol either the OUN-UPA or Soviet totalitarianism but would mourn the victims of both sides has not asserted itself” (p. 514). Unfortunately, in the almost two years since, following the Russian annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, the Bandera cult has transformed from a symbol of anti-Soviet resistance into an anti-Russian mobilisation factor while the propaganda of the Russian authorities seeks to depict the entire Ukrainian people as enthusiastic supporters of extreme Ukrainian nationalism or even ‘fascism’, making the prospects for the emergence of such an approach appear even less probable. The further institutionalisation of historical memory in legislation regarding both the OUN-UPA and the Soviet legacy in 2015, accompanied by the state-sanctioned embedding of a particular version of Ukrainian history in institutes of ‘national memory’, led by historians such as Volodymyr V’iatrovych who act as apologists of Ukrainian nationalism, offer even less hope that the mourning of the historical traumas Rossoliński-Liebe invokes in the conclusion to his study will materialise in the foreseeable future.

Perhaps the one concept that still remains problematic in Rossoliński-Liebe’s biography of Stepan Bandera is that of ‘fascism’. This is not surprising, considering the widely-acknowledged difficulties inherent in providing a consistent definition of the generic term, as well as its contested applicability to various cases, sometimes involving qualifications such as ‘clerical fascism’ or ‘Austro-fascism’. The issue is compounded by the fact that self-identifications of members of far right and fascist movements, historical and contemporary, typically avoid using the term; by its specificities in the Central and Eastern European context (the different role played by religion in the ideologies of interwar nationalisms being but one of them); and by the special case presented by interwar Ukrainian nationalism with respect to its lack of statehood and the subsequent functioning of the OUN as an underground organisation. Such limitations are indeed acknowledged by the author, not only in this book but also in a subsequent study, significantly entitled ‘The Fascist Kernel of Ukrainian Genocidal Nationalism’ (Rossoliński-Liebe, 2015). Yet, despite a comprehensive overview

demonstrating his thorough familiarity with the main theoretical approaches to the concept associated with the so-called 'new consensus' in fascist studies, the definition adopted by the author (p. 33) appears at once too broad and extensive and in some respects ill-suited for the case study under consideration. Some of its components do not fit some of the established cases of fascist movements and regimes (such as anti-Semitism for the case of the Italian regime until 1938; or racism for the Romanian 'Legion of the Archangel Michael'); others, such as populism, appear tenuous when applied to a movement that until World War II was forced to function as an underground, conspiratorial organisation. The case for the palingenetic element of fascist ideology is difficult to make in the absence of a state whose glory is sought to be restored and regenerated, while the *Führerprinzip*, often taking centre stage (and understandably so for a study that aims to be biographical before everything else), was undoubtedly characteristic of regimes such as Antonescu's or Franco's, which the author correctly identifies as conservative rather than fascist. The frequent association of the concept of fascism with anti-Semitism or ethnic violence in general is also a problematic one, as considerable evidence (such as the aforementioned regime of Ion Antonescu) points to numerous parties, movements, or regimes that displayed the latter without necessarily being fascist. Given the importance of the concept of 'fascism' not only for the history of Ukrainian nationalism, but also in the context of contemporary Ukraine, further studies aimed at clarifying this aspect appear necessary, and the author's demonstrated familiarity with the topic recommends him for such endeavours. Moreover, in its constant attempts to position the question of Ukrainian nationalism or fascism in an international context, through frequent, extensive and informed analyses encompassing a comparative approach, as well as the transfers and entanglements affecting the evolution of the OUN, the study represents a very useful contribution to the recently-developing transnational approach to the history of fascism and the interwar extreme right, particularly valuable given its under-development in the area of Central and Eastern Europe (Iordachi, 2010; Bauerkämper, 2010). An essential biography of one of the most controversial figures in modern Eastern European history, Grzegorz Rossoliński-Liebe's book is also a book for a wide readership: historians of the Holocaust; scholars interested in minority issues and the history of inter-ethnic interactions in an area that was (and is today unfortunately much less so) profoundly multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-confessional; social scientists working on contemporary Ukraine but less familiar with the intricate details of its modern history and their lasting impact on the contemporary situation; researchers of fascism and anti-Semitism, both historical and contemporary; as well as historians generally interested in integrating the history of Central and Eastern Europe, for

far too long confined to the domain of ‘area studies’, into a genuinely European historiography.

Notes

¹ Jared McBride, ‘How Ukraine’s New Memory Commissar Is Controlling the Nation’s Past’, *The Nation*, 13 August 2015, available at: <http://www.thenation.com/article/how-ukraines-new-memory-commissar-is-controlling-the-nations-past/> (accessed 12 April 2016); ‘New laws in Ukraine potential threat to free expression and free media, OSCE Representative says’, 18 May 2015, available at: <http://www.osce.org/fom/158581> (accessed 12 April 2016); ‘Ukraine’s law on “decommunisation” does not comply with EU standards – Venice Commission, OSCE / ODIHR’, *Interfax-Ukraine*, 19 December 2015, available at: <http://en.interfax.com.ua/news/general/312592.html> (accessed 12 April 2016).

² ‘On the Legal Status and Honoring the Memory of Fighters for Ukraine's Independence in the Twentieth Century’, *Ukrainian Institute of National Memory*, available at: <http://www.memory.gov.ua/laws/law-ukraine-legal-status-and-honoring-memory-fighters-ukraines-independence-twentieth-century> (accessed 12 April 2016).

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