

World War II as an Identity Project: Historicism, Legitimacy Contests, and the
(Re-)Construction of Political Communities in Ukraine, 1939-1946, Oleksandr Melnyk
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Oleksandr Melnyk's World War II as an Identity Project This is an excellent study of the
experience and legacies of the Second World War in Ukraine. Oleksandr Melnyk The author
traces the impact of war from the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact, through the Axis occupations,
~~to~~ and the later reestablishment of Soviet power. He also explores the relationship between
history, legitimacy, and silence within the processes of establishing making states and
political communities in postwar Ukraine.

The book will be essential reading for scholars of Soviet relations with the Axis powers,
partisan movements, Ukrainian nationalism, and the Holocaust. Its key contribution lies in
analysing how the USSR dealt with the traumas of war. Drawing on archival material from
Moscow, Kyiv, and Ukraine's regions, as well as from collections of the U.S. Holocaust
Memorial Museum and from, film, and literature, Melnyk combines an ambitious
geographical scope with evocative micro-historical studies. Materials from the secret police
(SBU) archives in Kyiv are especially important for highlighting the fluid boundaries and
complex relations between Soviet and anti-Soviet partisans, Red Army veterans, and the
USSR's security organs during and after the war. The book builds on and complicates Amir
Weiner's classic study of "making sense of war" in the Vinnytsia region. Additionally, by
placing war crimes trials in the context of Soviet security policies, it also challenges recent
studies that frame Soviet postwar policies as part of a transnational search for justice. The
Melnyk's conclusion – that the drive to (re)establish Soviet legitimacy among fragmented

and brutalised communities in Ukraine overshadowed the importance of punishing war criminals — will likely inspire fruitful debate.

Melnyk's concise yet nuanced account of occupation and violence in the opening chapters of the book is well-suited for senior undergraduate and postgraduate classes on Soviet, Ukrainian, East European history. Chapter One lays out the complex landscape of Ukraine during the war, exploring the experiences of millions of people who "lived in a twilight zone between Axis forces and guerrillas" (p. 111). Melnyk traces the shifting ethnic hierarchies in Ukraine from 1939 to the postwar period, identifies the origins of wartime anti-Jewish pogroms, and demonstrates how patterns of resistance, collaboration, and adaptation differed across Ukraine under different Axis occupation regimes.

Highlighting the "impermanence of situational alliances under the conditions of contested sovereignty" (p. 133), Chapter Two moves beyond the usual focus on the regions of Galicia and Volhynia to explore the role of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army throughout Ukraine during the 1940s. Outlining the broader strategic, military, and political context, Melnyk focuses on an in-depth study of the town of Bohuslav near Kyiv: doing so allows him to demonstrate how the Stalinist tendency to equate all forms of resistance with nationalism, Axis occupation, and Soviet approaches to wartime traumas helped Ukrainianise communities that had previously had more amorphous and localised identities. After the war, Melnyk argues, the USSR built its legitimacy in Ukraine on wartime sacrifices, "obscuring the complex identities of fallen fighters and side-stepping problematic local memories of military mobilizations" (p. 163).

Subsequent chapters provide rich insights into Soviet politics of justice in the later stages of the war and after 1945. The author shows that the Soviet authorities had remarkably accurate information about patterns of collaboration and resistance in Axis-occupied Ukraine very early on and throughout the war, but also that this information sometimes diverged considerably from the mobilisation~~al~~ narratives that appeared in Soviet propaganda. The more in control the Soviets were, Melnyk further argues, the less severe the measures against collaborators became. Public trials of German war criminals effectively overshadowed the complexity of wartime experiences and the particularities of violence against non-titular national groups in Ukraine, such as Jews and Poles. ~~While it is ultimately~~ difficult to prove that the silencing of wartime collaboration and interethnic violence constituted a conscious or planned policy, ~~as and~~ Melnyk implies by emphasizing that the “diverse experiences of “retribution” must be seen along a continuum” (p218). Still, the book suggests that a more thorough reckoning with the role that non-Germans played in wartime violence was sidestepped, for it was bound to raise troubling questions about the legacies of the Holodomor and Stalinist terror at a time when Soviet legitimacy in Ukraine was shaky at best. Melnyk ~~ultimately~~ highlights-asserts that memory of war was shaped by the secret police, state archivists, and other institutions ~~which-that~~ prioritised legitimacy and security over justice, promoting the myth of Soviet and East Slavic unity vis-à-vis external aggression. As he puts it:

“[I]n a society fragmented by experiences of mass violence before and during the Axis occupation, few collective experiences could act as a factor of political consolidation. By 1943, however, a societal consensus has largely formed around the subject of Nazi criminality, which the Soviet government had systematically attempted to instrumentalise politically since the first intelligence reports about enemy crimes reached the Soviet leadership in the summer of 1941” (pp180-81).

Although postwar political realities and generational changes “to a considerable degree overrode earlier divisions between the Soviet state and its opponents/victims” (p127), divisive memories of the Second World War continued to plague Soviet Ukrainian society after 1945. Narratives of interethnic violence, the Holocaust, and collaboration were silenced in Soviet public culture, but they survived in the context of “everyday mnemonic practices in the formerly occupied territories” (p296). They resurfaced under Mikhail Gorbachev’s *glasnost*, raising troubling questions about the nature and legitimacy of Soviet rule in Ukraine. Moreover, while the Soviet myth of the Great Patriotic War was strongly Russocentric, many Ukrainians took it for granted that their co-ethnics made a decisive contribution to victory over Nazi Germany. These dynamics lay the ground for post-Soviet memory wars. Melnyk’s book, which masterfully adapts Eric Hobsbawm’s notion of “historicism”² ~~to~~^{for} the Soviet context, enriches our understanding of the politics of memory in the USSR and its successor states.

World War II as an Identity Project is a major contribution to decentring the study of Soviet and East European history. Close attention to political, social, and geopolitical factors allows Melnyk to demonstrate that “Soviet modernity”¹, which has been frequently studied through the prism of cultural history and framed as a homogeneous ideological project coordinated from Moscow, actually acquired distinct meanings across space.

Zbigniew Wojnowski
University of Oxford