

# CICERO FOUNDATION GREAT DEBATE PAPER

No. 10/05

March 2010

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## UKRAINE, EUROPE, AND BANDERA

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### *Introduction*

The controversy was unleashed on January 22, 2010, when then President Viktor Yushchenko, conferred Hero of Ukraine status on the Ukrainian nationalist, Stepan Bandera. Critics accused Yushchenko of whitewashing a fascist and betraying the ideals of the Orange Revolution that brought him to power. Then, one month later, the European Parliament joined the fray by adopting a Resolution in which it “deeply deplores the decision by the outgoing President of Ukraine, Viktor Yushchenko, posthumously to award Stepan Bandera, a leader of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) which collaborated with Nazi Germany, the title of ‘National Hero of Ukraine; hopes, in this regard, that the new Ukrainian leadership will reconsider such decisions and will maintain its commitment to European values.”

Just why is a man who died in 1959 the object of so much acclaim and so much opprobrium? Who was Bandera? Was the OUN fascist? Did it collaborate with Nazi Germany? What does Bandera represent? Does he deserve a Hero of Ukraine award? And, finally, does conferral of Hero of Ukraine status represent a disregard for European values? As we shall see, the answers to these questions are anything but clear-cut.

### *Who was Bandera?*

Stepan Bandera, born in 1909 in what was then Austria-Hungary, was the leader of one of the factions of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, a typically nationalist movement that emerged in 1929, took root in the Ukrainian-inhabited lands of eastern Poland in the 1930s, and engaged in grass roots organization of young people and occasional acts of violence against the Polish authorities and perceived Ukrainian turncoats. He spent much of the late 1930s in a Polish prison and much of the early 1940s in a German prison. After the war, he became the leader of one of the émigré OUN factions known as the OUN-B and remained in charge of its anti-Soviet activities until being assassinated by a Soviet agent in Munich in 1959. Although Bandera is associated with the Ukrainian resistance movement that bears his name, he never set foot in today's Ukraine after 1934. His name came to symbolize the nationalist struggle, partly because his supporters used it to differentiate themselves from other OUN factions and partly because the Soviets used it to suggest that the movement lacked popular support.

Bandera, like most of the youthful members of the OUN in eastern Poland, was deeply committed to waging a revolutionary struggle for an independent Ukrainian state. Bandera was no democrat, and he was no liberal. He admired toughness, hierarchy, and strict discipline. He believed a revolutionary movement could succeed only if it had an authoritarian structure and a strong leader. He had no qualms about employing violence in the pursuit of national liberation. In all these regards, he and his radical nationalist comrades closely resembled the Algerian nationalists in the National Liberation Front, the Palestinian nationalists in the Palestine Liberation Organization, and the Jewish nationalists in the Irgun or the "Stern Gang." Bandera was the Ukrainian version of Ahmed Ben Bella, Yasser Arafat, Menachem Begin, and Avraham Stern.

### *Was the OUN fascist?*

Answering this question requires a brief digression into definitions—of both nationalism and fascism. Nationalism can be understood either as an ideology or as a movement. As an ideology, nationalism is a set of ideas that explains why a nation should have its own independent state. As a movement, nationalism is a set of organizations or individuals that pursue independent statehood for a nation. In sum, nationalism is about *national liberation*.

Fascism can be understood as an ideology, a system of rule, or a movement. As an ideology, fascism is a set of ideas that explain why a specifically fascist system of rule is optimal for society. As a system of rule, fascism is non-democratic and non-socialist and has a domineering party, a supreme leader, a hyper-masculine leader cult, and a chauvinist, statist ideology. As a movement, fascism is a set of organizations or individuals that pursue fascism as an ideology and a system of rule. In sum, fascism is about a *system of rule*.

There is no reason that nationalism must have fascist components. The striving for national liberation is perfectly compatible with every philosophy, political ideology, culture, and economic theory. Unsurprisingly, nationalist ideologies and movements have spanned the political spectrum, being found among democrats, liberals, authoritarians, militarists, fascists, Communists, Catholics, Islamists, Jews, and capitalists. Interwar nationalist movements tended to be influenced by the prevailing fascist ethos just as post-World War II national liberation struggles tended to be influenced by the prevailing Communist ethos—which is simply to say that nationalism is malleable and can adapt itself to a variety of political ideologies, even, as in the nineteenth century, to liberalism.

Fascism, meanwhile, presupposes an independent nation state and proposes to reorganize it along specifically fascist lines. In that sense, fascism is not about national liberation per se; instead, it assumes that national liberation and the attainment of a nation state has already taken place. Logically, this means that

nation-statehood is a necessary condition of fascism: that is, fascist ideologies, movements, and systems of rule can exist if and only if an independent nation state is already in existence.

Fascists therefore run or aspire to run already existing nation states. Nationalists, in contrast, aspire to create nation states. Fascists are always authoritarians and chauvinists; nationalists can be liberals, democrats, Communists, authoritarians, or fascists. Nationalists and fascists sometimes look alike, but their differences are greater than their similarities.

Seen in this light, the OUN is best regarded as a nationalist—and not a fascist—movement for several reasons.

First, the one thing every member of the Ukrainian nationalist movement agreed on—from its inception in the early 1920s to its demise in Ukraine in the mid-1950s to its survival in émigré form in subsequent decades—was national liberation and independent statehood. This is abundantly clear from official documents, letters, memoirs, interviews, eyewitness accounts, and secondary sources.

Second, the Ukrainian nationalist movement's relationship to political ideologies changed continually, proceeding from an apolitical militarism to authoritarianism to fascism to democracy to social democracy. The OUN's predecessor in the 1920s, the Ukrainian Military Organization (UVO), was a collection of patriotically inclined ex-soldiers with little sense of political ideology. The OUN began initially as a quasi-authoritarian movement, adopted fascist elements by the late 1930s and early 1940s, abandoned them by 1943-1944, and began adopting progressively more democratic and social-democratic characteristics in the mid- to late-1940s and 1950s. Nationalism was constant, while the political ideology was variable.

Third, many of the fascist-like elements of the Ukrainian nationalist movement can be accounted for by the demands of illegal underground activity. All national-liberation struggles, whether in Ukraine, Croatia, Vietnam, Algeria, Ireland, Spain,

Israel, or Palestine, must be hierarchical and conspiratorial; all emphasize the primacy of the political in general and the independent state in particular; all are hostile to real and perceived enemies, whether other movements, other nations, or potential turncoats within their own nations; and all employ violence and oftentimes terrorism. These similarities are not accidental, as pursuing the goal of an independent nation-state is rightly perceived by existing states as profoundly subversive and thereby forces movements to adapt accordingly.

Fourth, some fascist-like components of the Ukrainian nationalist movement may also be explained by its existence within a “tough,” anti-democratic neighborhood. Inter-war Europe in general and inter-war Eastern Europe in particular had very few exemplars of effective liberal democracy. Authoritarianism was the rule, and it would have been well-nigh impossible for an underground nationalist movement to have adopted liberal democratic goals in such circumstances. Moreover, authoritarianism, totalitarianism, and fascism seemed to “work,” regenerating and revitalizing struggling societies all across Europe, Latin America, and Asia.

None of these points gets the Ukrainian nationalists off the hook. There is no doubt that they moved in the direction of fascism and that, by the early 1940s, many of them had fully bought into its tenets. That said, they did so precisely because they were nationalists. Violence, authoritarianism, and conspiracy provided the means of national liberation, while fascism provided a vision of the future Ukrainian nationalist state. While violence, authoritarianism, and conspiracy are intrinsic to underground radical movements—one simply cannot imagine the Ukrainian nationalists without them—fascism was conditionally attractive. If it seemed to suggest the way to go, nationalists embraced it. If it proved not to be the way to go—as the German crackdown on the nationalists in mid-1941 demonstrated—then alternatives had to be found and, more important, were found. And they could be found precisely because fascism was not an intrinsic component of the Ukrainian nationalist movement or, for that matter, of any genuine nationalist movement.

*Did the OUN collaborate with Nazi Germany?*

Another excursion into definitions is imperative. Individuals or groups who abandon their sovereign aspirations and serve another power's goals are generally called *collaborators*. Individuals or groups who retain their sovereign aspirations and align with some power in pursuit of their own goals—even nondemocratic ones—are generally called *allies*. Marshall Petain abandoned French sovereignty and served Nazi Germany and is rightly called a collaborator. Neville Chamberlain retained his country's sovereignty while abetting Nazi Germany's goals in Munich and is rightly called an appeaser. Joseph Stalin retained Soviet sovereignty while cooperating with Nazi Germany and is rightly called an ally of Hitler. President Roosevelt retained American sovereignty and pursued his country's goals together with the Soviet Union and is rightly called an ally of Stalin.

Bandera and the OUN he led aspired to great things in 1940-1941. They imagined themselves not as Berlin's underlings, but as Berlin's allies. They hoped for an alliance with Nazi Germany against the Soviet Union, which had just occupied the Ukrainian-inhabited territories of eastern Poland and brutally imposed a bloody revolution from above. Much to the Nazis' surprise, the Bandera nationalists issued a proclamation of independence of June 30, 1941 in which they declared their support of Hitler's New Europe. Fortunately for the Ukrainian nationalists, the Nazis failed to oblige, cracking down on the OUN in mid-1941, imprisoning Bandera in Sachsenhausen and two of his brothers in Auschwitz, and inadvertently saving the nationalists from a collaborationist and possibly fascist fate. The Bandera nationalists then went underground and eventually came to lead a massive popular resistance movement that fought both the Germans and, eventually, the Soviets. German documents amply illustrate the degree to which the Nazi authorities regarded the *Banderabewegung* as a serious, anti-German force.

In sum, Bandera and the OUN wanted to be allies of Nazi Germany, while Nazi Germany wanted them to be collaborators. The June 30<sup>th</sup> proclamation of independence revealed just what radically, uncompromisingly nationalist goals the

OUN had in mind. But an independent Ukrainian nation state, even if led by nationalists with fascist leanings, was an unacceptable ally for Nazi Germany, which wanted pliant, non-sovereign Ukrainian collaborators instead.

To be sure, even though the OUN-B turned against Nazi Germany, it did not therefore immediately become a modern democratic organization with a liberal commitment to human rights. Instead, the OUN's travails with Nazi Germany exposed it to contradictory forces that eventually moved it away from authoritarianism and toward greater democracy and tolerance, but not without zigzags. On the one hand, the nationalists continued to lead a violent resistance movement that brooked little democratic governance. Moreover, they continued to see the Poles and to a far lesser extent the Jews as the enemies of Ukrainian independence. Poles were the primary obstacle—both theoretically, because it was their state that had to be dismantled for an independent Ukraine to exist; and practically, because they held, or hoped during the war to reacquire, the levers of power in western Ukraine. Not surprisingly perhaps, nationalist enmity toward Poles, together with a strategic calculation by both sides that strategically important territory had to be seized before the Germans retreated and the Soviets approached, led to the bloodbaths in Volhynia in mid-1943. On the other hand, the nationalists discovered in their disappointing encounters with the Soviet Ukrainian population and as a result of their bitter experience with Nazi Germany that radical nationalism without democracy had limited appeal. By 1943-1944, they officially adopted a significantly more democratic and nationally inclusive program; by the late 1940s and early 1950s, that program acquired substantial social democratic elements.

Whether considered ethnic cleansing or inter-ethnic strife, the Ukrainian-Polish violence in Volhynia bears comparison, not with the state-directed destruction of ethnic groups by Nazi Germany, Ustasha Croatia, or Vichy France, but with the ethnic violence of Algerians against French  *pieds noirs* , of Irish nationalists against the British, of Palestinian nationalists against Israelis, and of Jewish nationalists against Palestinians. In all these instances, nationalists attacked and killed members of nations that held political power or controlled contested territory. Their methods

may be despicable—although they are not necessarily more despicable than the horrors of state-generated wars—but they are not the actions of fascist brutes with no sense of strategic rationality.

*What does Bandera represent?*

Soviet propaganda always demonized the nationalists, not for their violations of human rights—after all, who were the Soviets to care about human rights after inventing the Gulag?—but because of their opposition to Stalinist rule. The nationalists suffered over 150,000 casualties, while inflicting over 30,000 on Soviet troops and police units in the period between 1944 and 1955. Hundreds of thousands of nationalist sympathizers were also deported or imprisoned in the Gulag. The post-war nationalist resistance movement enjoyed vast support among the Ukrainian population of Western Ukraine precisely because it stood for opposition to Stalinism and its genocidal aspirations. Over the years, as Soviet rule became more entrenched, active popular support dwindled, but the Bandera nationalists continued to symbolize the cause of national liberation.

Soviet demonization of the nationalists promoted and created a deeply rooted image of them as savage cutthroats with no political or ideological agenda except for death and destruction. This image took root in, above all, the heavily Sovietized parts of eastern and southern Ukraine, which had served as strongholds of Communist Party rule. Russians and Russian speakers picked up on official cues and frequently insulted nationally conscious Ukrainians who dared to speak their own language by referring to them as “Banderas.” When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 and new states emerged on its rubble, Ukrainians—like all the other non-Russians—began questioning Soviet propaganda and constructing their own histories. What Soviet propagandists and historians had assiduously ignored or distorted became the object of research, discussion, and debate. What Russian chauvinists had used as a term of opprobrium—Bandera—became a term of praise, much in the way that African Americans appropriated the “N word” and gays the term “queer.”



For the Russians, the quest for historical memory meant, under Vladimir Putin, accepting Stalin and Stalinism as qualified goods. For the non-Russians, and especially for the Ukrainians, the quest for historical memory became inextricably connected to the search for an anti-Soviet identity. For Ukrainians, these discoveries were especially painful. Ukraine had experienced astounding human losses in the first half of the twentieth century. According to a 2008 study of the Moscow-based Institute of Demography, Ukraine suffered close to 15 million “excess deaths” between 1914 and 1948 at the hands of imperial Germany, the Soviet Union, and Nazi Germany. The attention of Ukrainian historians also centered on the Great Famine of 1932-1933, the Holodomor, which took some 4 million lives, at a rate of about 25,000 a day.

Unsurprisingly, Ukrainians began reexamining the villains of Soviet propaganda—Bandera and the nationalists. Most Ukrainian historians are actually quite objective in their treatment of the movement, seeing both its virtues and sins. Contemporary Ukrainians who regard Bandera as a hero lionize his and his movement’s implacable opposition to the Soviet Union in 1939-1955. No one regards the nationalists’ violence against Poles and Jews as laudable, but few regard it as central to what Bandera and the nationalists represent: a rejection of all things Soviet, a repudiation of anti-Ukrainian slurs, and unconditional devotion to Ukrainian independence. Bandera and the nationalists are also seen as the polar opposites of the corrupt, incompetent, and venal Ukrainian elites who have misruled Ukraine for the last twenty years.

Of course, this popular reading of Ukrainian history is one-sided, and a full account would entail both the good and the bad things Bandera and the nationalists did. But one-sided historical readings are not unusual, especially among insecure nations struggling to retain their new-found independence. In their national narratives, Algerians overlook the massacres of the French by Algerian nationalists, Palestinians overlook the violence against Israelis, and Israelis overlook the expulsion of Palestinians. By the same token, even the self-confident Americans remember Harry

Truman for his conclusion of the war, and not for his decision to destroy innocent Japanese civilians in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Bandera became especially popular as the noble ideals of the 2004 Orange Revolution were progressively tarnished by the heroes of that revolution, President Yushchenko and Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko. The more unpopular Yushchenko became, the more he promoted Bandera and the nationalists, in the hope that some of their idealistic glow would rub off on him. Unfortunately, Yushchenko's ill-considered conferral of Hero status on Bandera threw a wrench into the more or less even-tempered discussion of the nationalists and their legacy. Yushchenko's critics—among them Vladimir Putin and other official representatives of the Russian state that has rehabilitated Stalin—added fuel to the fire with their irresponsible accusations of fascism. At this point, a sensible discussion is almost impossible in the highly politicized atmosphere surrounding Bandera.

*Does Bandera deserve a Hero of Ukraine award?*

Yushchenko's decision to confer a Hero of Ukraine award on Bandera was ill-considered because it was neither urgent nor necessary. After all, why now, if Bandera had been dead for 51 years? And why Bandera, when Ukraine has so many prominent liberals and democrats to choose from? Yushchenko's motivations become clearer if we recall that the award enhanced his own political credentials among his potential electorate. In that sense, conferral of the award was an almost exclusively political act. That said, Yushchenko was also acting according to the ground rules followed by all Ukrainian presidents who have granted major state awards for reasons having little to do with actual achievements.

The Hero of Ukraine award was created in 1998 by then President Leonid Kuchma, very much on the spirit of the Hero awards formerly popular in the Soviet Union. Since its creation, the Hero of Ukraine award has been granted to a total of 194 individuals, the vast majority of whom are nonentities with few heroic characteristics. Some, such as Vyacheslav Chornovil, Mykola Rudenko, Ivan Dzyuba,

Levko Lukyanenko (who has recently taken to making anti-Semitic statements), and Vasyl Stus were courageous Soviet-era dissidents who did indeed act heroically. Others, such as Nina Matviyenko, Dmytro Hnatyuk, and Sofia Rotaru, were prominent singers with no known acts of heroism to their credit. The same holds true for boxer Vitaliy Klychko, footballer Andriy Shevchenko, and weight lifter Serhiy Bubka. And then there are former President Leonid Kravchuk, former Prime Minister Yukhym Zvyahilsky, and current parliamentary Speaker Volodymyr Lytvyn. Kravchuk did negotiate Ukraine's independence, but he also served as head of the Ukrainian Communist Party's counterpropaganda division for many years. Zvyahilsky was charged with corruption and fled to Israel. Lytvyn, who also has academic aspirations, has been accused of plagiarism; worse he may have been involved in the disappearance of journalist Heorhiy Gongadze, himself a recipient of the award, in 2000.

Lest one think that these award recipients are anomalies, consider who has received another of Ukraine's highest awards, the Order of Prince Yaroslav the Wise, established in 1996. These individuals include, among many others, President Nelson Mandela of South Africa; President Saparmurat Niyazov of Turkmenistan, the Turkmenbashi; P.V. Balabuyev, chairman of the Board of Directors of the Russian-Ukrainian Consortium of Medium Transport Aircraft, Kofi Annan, secretary general of the United Nations; Mary Beck, Ukrainian-American activist from Detroit; Moscow's Mayor Yurii Luzhkov; Viktor Chernomyrdin, Russian ambassador to Ukraine; Atamurat Niyazov, the father of President Saparmurat Niyazov of Turkmenistan; and Yuri Shymko, Ukrainian-Canadian activist.

Like the recipients of the Hero of Ukraine award, these recipients are a very mixed lot. Some are distinguished individuals, but many are not. Some of the recipients are nice people, but some—such as Chernomyrdin, Luzhkov, and the Turkmenbashi—are not. All in all, it seems reasonable to conclude that the Order is as much a tool of policy, as a genuine acknowledgement of outstanding service. Ukraine's leaders are quick to bestow the Order on the gas-rich Turkmen dictator and his long-deceased

father, influential Russian policy makers, and important foreign diplomats for obvious reasons of state.

A closer look at Ukraine's top awards suggests that they are largely meaningless and overwhelmingly political exercises. Bandera probably deserves the Hero of Ukraine award as much—or as little—as any of its other recipients. If the European Parliament is truly worried about what Ukraine's awards mean for European values, it would do well to review all past recipients and issue corresponding resolutions.

*Does conferral of Hero of Ukraine status represent a disregard for European values?*

The answer to this question partly depends on what one means by European values. Viewed historically, European values include above all militarism, racism, anti-Semitism, imperialism, and chauvinism. The values of democracy and human rights are a relatively recent historical addition to the plate and, strictly speaking, are not so much European values as the officially declared values of the European Union. Worse, these EU values are violated as often as they are observed—by Europeans themselves. Consider just one example of an award that produced no outcries from Europeans or from the EU's institutions.

One could easily argue that, when President Jacques Chirac conferred the Grand Cross of the Legion of Honor on Russia's president on September 23, 2006, he effectively rehabilitated one of the twentieth century's bloodiest secret police organizations and dishonored the millions who died in Soviet concentration camps. After all, Vladimir Putin not only quashed democracy in Russia, but he is also proud of having served in the KGB, which together with its predecessors terrorized, tortured, killed, and imprisoned millions in the Gulag. While this kind of association should have raised eyebrows, European policy makers, scholars, and journalists accepted Putin's choice as if it were merely a career move. German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder even went so far as to call Putin a "real democrat" at the height of Ukraine's Orange Revolution in late 2004.

Naturally, a *tu quoque* argument such as this does not justify Bandera's Hero of Ukraine award, but it does place it in perspective. If Putin can receive a Grand Cross and Menachem Begin, Yasser Arafat, and South Africa's ex-racist president, Frederik Willem de Klerk, can receive the Nobel Peace Prize, then Bandera can be deemed a hero. The honors bestowed on Putin, Begin, Arafat, and de Klerk surely represent at least as much of a disregard for EU values as Bandera's. Strictly speaking, none of them should have been recognized, as each of them had a decidedly checkered past ranging from belonging to a criminal secret police to engaging in terrorism to supporting apartheid. But recognized they were precisely because recognitions are political actions that reward particular achievements and not historically nuanced judgments of an individual's entire life. Putin supported France; Begin and Arafat promoted peace; de Klerk dismantled apartheid; and Bandera resisted Soviet totalitarianism.

In condemning Bandera's Hero of Ukraine status the European Parliament injected itself into contemporary Ukrainian politics in a way that has thus far had primarily unfortunate consequences. Many nationally conscious Ukrainians—who represent the core of Ukraine's civil society and democratic movement—resent being singled out for their views of their heroes and point to double standards and European hypocrisy. In turn, the anti-democratic forces—who generally support sanitized Soviet versions of the past and tend to align with the Kremlin's authoritarian project—have used the resolution to promote their anti-democratic and anti-Ukrainian agendas. Ironically, if unintentionally, the European Parliament has effectively joined forces with the anti-democrats and chauvinists and served to undermine Ukrainian democracy.

At this point, it is unclear just how this Gordian knot can be cut. If the European Parliament amends its resolution, it will look ineffective. If it does not, it will continue to play an unconstructive role in Ukraine's messy politics. If President Viktor Yanukovich rescinds the award, he will unleash a storm of protest from Ukrainians who will view his action as an anti-Ukrainian—and not an anti-Bandera—move. If he does not rescind the award, Yanukovich will be ignoring Europe and

ostensibly thumbing his nose at “European values.” Poland’s ambassador to Ukraine, Jacek Kluczkowski, appears to have been looking for an way out of this dilemma in his March 24 interview to Ukraine’s UNIAN Information Agency: “It is of course untrue that Bandera was a German collaborator and one shouldn’t accuse him of collaboration. But are Bandera’s slogans adequate for a modern democratic state? Can such a very disputed figure be a modern exemplar for a people aspiring to move toward European integration? That is why we were disturbed by this award. But the decision to confer or not to confer titles is Ukraine’s matter.”

The only solution to this problem may be for Ukraine and the EU to win some breathing space by establishing a blue-ribbon commission consisting of respected scholars to investigate both Bandera—and the generalized practice of giving awards to individuals with checkered pasts. Such a move just might reduce tensions and help depoliticize a touchy subject, without doing any more damage to the cause of Ukrainian democracy, the attractiveness of European values, and the credibility of European institutions.

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A long-time critic of the Bandera movement, Alexander J. Motyl is the author of *The Turn to the Right: The Ideological Origins and Development of Ukrainian Nationalism, 1919-1929* and of other books and articles on Ukrainian nationalism.

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