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Eastern European Traumas of 20th century. Lessons for Our Political Creativity

The article aims to revert the past-focused orientation of the Ukrainian political culture, as well as that of Eastern Europe more broadly. The author reviews the traumas of the last 15 years that have impacted the emerging crises of the 21st century. The author argues that today's attempts to use forms and methods of political action from the 20th

century will inevitably lead to a repeat of such tragedies in the coming era.

Keywords: political culture, trauma, Bloodlands, Stalinism, Chernobyl, World War Two, XXI century.

Статтю спрямовано на переорієнтацію української і ширше – східноєвропейської політичної культури з уваги до минулого на увагу до майбутнього. Автор аналізує травми двадцятого століття та їхній вплив на розвиток криз ХХІ століття. Автор доводить, що сьгоднішні спроби застосовувати форми і методи політичної дії ХХ століття неодмінно призведуть до повторення його трагедій у столітті, що настає.

Ключові слова: політична культура, травма, криваві землі, сталінізм, Чорнобиль, Друга світова війна, двадцять перше століття.

We now live in a time that pre-defines the future of Eastern Europe. This is the period of the beginning of a somewhat belated 21st century for Ukraine, Russia, Belarus and our region as a whole. This beginning requires wisdom, strength and resilience from us to make the new century more humane, safer and more pro-life than the previous hundred years have been.

Looking back to the events of 2014–2015, I ask myself: what shall define the future of our region?

The Kyiv mass-shouting, the fire in Odessa and Russo-Ukrainian war, or a chance for democratic inclusive development in Ukraine and the rest of Eastern Europe, brought by Euromaidan?

I ask, but I know that I will not have the correct answer. I can only guess, my guess based upon something that is vested into the long-term processes in Eastern European political culture.

Eastern Europe is diverse. So are their political cultures. But the contemporary history of nations in our region provides us with some clues regarding one common feature: our political leaders, civic activists

and public intellectuals often tend to distrust their own political creativity and prefer to look back into the past for solutions of contemporary problems. Too often we see past as a prevailing source of inspiration for the forms and models of social, economic and political life.

But is our past that good to offer us reliable, comprehensive and lasting solutions?

The 20th century has changed Ukraine and her neighbors tremendously. We are a nation of many traumas. The most visible and memorable is the trauma of the two World Wars. Tens of millions of men and women were killed during battles and occupation periods, entire generations gone.

World War II destroyed not only individual lives, but natural and cultural environments. The wilderness areas of Ukraine and Belarus have never been restored. Sub-cultures of Ukrainian Jews, Poles, Germans, and Sinti-Roma have tremendously changed because of annihilation of their predecessors.

The next is the 'Totalitarian trauma.' First of all, it was a direct result of Stalinism. This peculiar ideology and logic political action caused for the Eastern Europe what Timothy D. Snyder called 'Bloodlands.' Specifically, he wrote:

*"In the middle of Europe in the middle of the twentieth century, the Nazi and Soviet regimes murdered some fourteen million people. The place where all of the victims died, the bloodlands, extends from central Poland to western Russia, through Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltic States. The victims were chiefly Jews, Belarusians, Ukrainians, Poles, Russians, and Balts, the peoples native to these lands. The fourteen million were murdered over the course of only twelve years, between 1933 and 1945, while both Hitler and Stalin were in power."*¹

"In both the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, utopias were advanced, compromised by reality, and then implemented as mass murder: in autumn 1932 by Stalin, and autumn 1941 by Hitler. Stalin's utopia was to collectivize the Soviet Union in nine to twelve weeks; Hitler's was to conquer the Soviet Union in the same span of time. Each of these seems, in retrospect, to be horrendously impractical. Yet each of them was implemented, under the cover of a big lie, even after failure was obvious. Dead human beings provided retrospective arguments for the rectitude of policy. Hitler and Stalin thus shared a certain politics of tyranny: they

*brought about catastrophes, blamed the enemy of their choice, and then used the death of millions to make the case that their policies were necessary or desirable. Each of them had a transformative utopia, a group to be blamed when its realization proved impossible, and then a policy of mass murder that could be proclaimed as a kind of ersatz victory."*²

Totalitarian trauma was less connected with the war itself. Wartime permitted an un-civil state and its murderous practices, whereas the totalitarian trauma is connected with the murderous and anti-freedom practices during the peaceful times. It was vested in collectivization and industrialization, resulting in fundamental suspicion and distrust in the political instincts of several generations. These instincts did not disappear with the fall of totalitarianism in 1956, or with the dissolution of Soviet Union in 1991.

Yet another trauma was connected with Soviet modernization. Even though the nature of the Soviet modernity is still being discussed among historians, sociologists and philosophers,³ it has a distinct style and coding. As Terry Martin has wittingly defined it,

*"Modernization is the theory of Soviet intentions; neo-traditionalism, the theory of their unintended consequences."*⁴

This cyclic, self-contradictory modernity has been perverting the very idea of freedom, the guiding idea of Western modernization. Instead of promoting individualization and self-realization values, this modernity, veiled behind the promise of liberties, invented and institutionalized the most obscure forms of dehumanization and extreme collectivization. As a result, Soviet history can equally be described in terms of democides (see Figure 1.4 from Table 1.1⁵), or through the eyes of tortured individuality (as in experimental history by group of Russian historians led

² Ibid., p. 387–388.

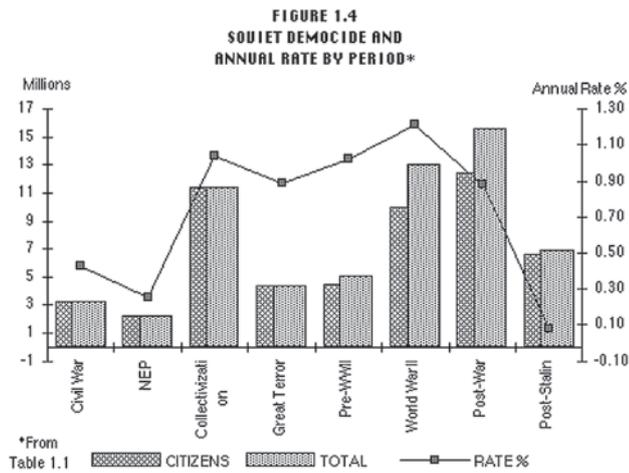
³ See for example: Kotsonis Y. Introduction: A Modern Paradox – Subject and Citizen in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Russia // Russian Modernity. – New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000. – PP. 1–18; Hofmann D. European Modernity and Soviet Socialism // Russian Modernity. – New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000. – PP. 245–260; Fitzpatrick S. Introduction // Stalinism: New Directions. – London & New York, Routledge, 2000. – PP. 1–14.

⁴ Martin T. Modernization or Neo-Traditionalism // Fitzpatrick S. (ed). Stalinism: New Directions. – London & New York: Routledge, 2000. – P. 361.

⁵ The Figure 1.4. from: Rummel R. J. Lethal Politics: Soviet Genocide and Mass Murder Since 1917. – New Brunswick, N. J.: Transaction Publishers, 1990. – P. 86. Available from: <https://www.hawaii.edu/powerkills/USSR.CHAP.1.HTM>

¹ Snyder T. Bloodlands. Europe between Hitler and Stalin. – New York: Basic Books, 2010. – P. VII–VIII.

by Andrei Zubov ¹). Absolutism of reason reached an extreme articulation in economic planning, deportations of millions, pressure on peasants to leave for cities, GULag slavery, non-free philosophy of Soviet Marxism, and many other forms.



As a result of its grand experiments, Soviet modernization caused the loss of a multitude of traditions, forcing the mixture of urban life and industrial civilization without entrepreneurial culture.

Each of the aforementioned cultural traumas has a deep impact on today's Ukraine. But Soviet industrialism led to the 'Chernobyl trauma', a unique experience for Ukrainians who were losing their trust in science. Disappointment with scientific and technological progress resulted in the blooming magic irrationality and pessimistic worldview.

This list isn't complete, but it just shows what unprecedented traumatic experience we had in the 20th century. We are not the same we were in 1917–22 when our 20th century started. So why do we look at it as for a source of solutions?

I think this obsession with the 20th century has to do with our post-Soviet experience. We all started in 1991 with a brave expectation of national democracies and free economies in a world without ideological divisions and wars. Yet in several years, political regimes turned into oligarchy, and later into authoritarian rule. Economic freedoms were abolished making us among the least free economic systems in the world. Our communities lost self-governance rights. Our citizens were increasingly dependent on a budget controlled by political patrons. Our peoples ceased to reproduce making our countries not the place for life, but a space of life's decline. By 2010, Eastern European countries had turned into dystopian spaces.

¹ История России. XX век. В 2-х томах. Отв. ред. А. Зубов. – М.: АСТ, 2009.

Experiencing a loss of hope led us naturally to pessimism. The more widespread this pessimism was, the faster power elites abused their privileged positions. Even in the moments when our societies heroically opposed to entropic and weakening self-distrust – like in times of color revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan – these actions did not lead to a longstanding success, nor to greater self-confidence and creativity. The less satisfied our societies were, the less we trusted ourselves, and the more we looked for 20th century for answers.

It seems that lack of self-confidence in our societies has put us into a space and a period of hegemony of the past. As Olick and Demetriou proved, 'what 'trauma' does for cultural history, 'ressentiment' does for social and political theory', they act together leading to 'ages of compensation.'² In a way, this long 20th century turned out to be a self-promoting model. The post-Soviet age of compensation of 1990s caused Sovietism and its mid-20th-century opponents to become trend-setters for our societies. Lenin, Stalin, Bandera and other names from the past are once again influence actions of the living people. Resseniments of the 20th century have brought us into times when we follow their examples, their experiences. 'Reconstruction of the past' became a leading logic of social action, in the fruitless time of Victor Yushchenko's rule, and in the current separatists' social experiments.

This vicious cycle of traumas must be stopped. Let the past stay where it belongs. Let's keep memories for ourselves and for history, but keep this away from social, economic and political creativity of the living. Let's let the moment now have its own voice.

It is exactly philosophy's function to change beliefs and limit superstitions. As Richard Rorty once stated, 'if we, philosophers, still have a specific task, it is the task of persuasion.'³ Well, it is up to us to try and change the tendency to see the past as source of solutions.

Yes, the Eastern European societies had unfulfilled expectations of free and fair society associated with independence. Our hopes have been contrasted with a deep and long economic crisis, a return to poverty, and the construction of yet another unjust society. But why treat negative experience as the end of life? Each experience is valid. It just needs to be treated differently.

² Olick J. K., Demetriou C. From Theodicy to Ressentiment / Bell D. (ed). Memory, trauma and world politics: reflections on the relationship between past and present. – New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. – P. 75.

³ Рорти Р. Философия и будущее // Вопросы философии. – 1994. – № 6. – С.4.

The difference I speak about is the one that is granted by therapeutic opportunities of pragmatic turn. Yes, our societies now focus on the past. Let's change it, and break from what our fathers in the 20th century did – conflicting with the past, breaking ties, and traumatizing cultures with abrupt forceful social change. We must make the past our partner for creating an inspiring and reachable future. This can be done if we stop listening to the traumatic experiences of the past. We must draw lessons, remembering the past but not let it limit our possibilities.

The previous generations in Eastern Europe were not only revolutionaries and dictators, executioners and victims. There was generosity, solidarity and creativity behind us. Let's stop seeing past only in terms of conflicts – class, ethnic, or social. Let's see what inspired our grandfathers not only survive, but also be humans with dignity and pursue daring projects.

Let us stop treating the past in terms of traumas. Traumas re-produce the past mistakes, bring old cleavages and resentments into today. Let's make sense of the past, draw lessons of success and reduce harm.

Ukraine has a special role in Eastern Europe. Our two post-Soviet decades have proven us to be the weak element in the network of de-modernizing societies. We stood up for the freedom twice in our recent history. We were brave and unpredictably creative in finding ways to oppose mighty authoritarian rulers. We proved to be an opportunity for entire region: an opportunity for free societies, economies and states. If Eastern Europe can become a place of booming life and freedom, it can start only from us.

Ukraine has a mission, for which we pay a huge price. This is the mission to reconcile our own nation, and nations of the Eastern Europe.

And here I want to dwell on three lessons that could help us start healing our region:

First, we must never let our region be the Bloodlands again. We must be a leader in the process of creating of regional security system. This system should prevent conflict in our part of the world, and prevent us from being a buffer-zone of any kind. All external sources of conflicts should timely monitored

and prevented. All self-isolation policies should be left in the past. We must be proactive and responsible leader for peaceful Eastern Europe.

Second, we must assure that authoritarian rule never returns to Ukraine, or to our neighbors. We should set an example of democratic pluralism and a united nation with a healthy balance of self-governing communities and responsive central government. Our political system should prevent from any type of rule that could start large-scale social experiments leading to Holodomor, collectivization or forceful industrialization. Our political system must be based on the idea of open access order and support creativity of individuals and groups in politics, economy, science and arts.

Third, our unity must follow the principle of 'e pluribus unum.' Ukraine is a home for Ukrainians and many other nations. Multitudes of cultures, languages, traditions and confessions are not only to be respected, but should also become the treasury, the basis for Ukraine's vibrant and sustainable development.

I put forth these lessons in the time of huge risk for our country and our region. The war is here. The economic crisis is here. The loss of population – in war, in displacement, in emigration – is going on. But all of these challenges must have an adequate answer: we should be wise and resilient to overcome and win.

Our future success totally depends on our focus: will we be creative in solving problems, or will we use ways and methods that have proved to be part of ever-returning cycle of poverty, dictatorship and bloodshed?

The current task of reconciliation is the first step in a long-term strategy for Eastern Europe successful future. The secure, free and creative Eastern Europe will be created with our leadership. We already paid for this with a huge price, and we have to get what we are paying for. It is Ukraine's mission to reconcile her own nation, and nations of the Eastern Europe. We are to bring back the prospective for life into Ukraine and other Eastern European nations.