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Review Essay
Ukrainian Nationalism from Shevchenko to the Maidan: A Czech Perspective[1]

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David Svoboda. ***Jablko z oceli: Zrod, vývoj a činnost ukrajinského radikálního nacionalismu v letech 1920–1939*** [*Apple of Steel: The Origin, Development, and Activities of Ukrainian Radical Nationalism during the Years 1920–1939*]. Nakladatelství Academia / Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů, 2021. Historie [History], 1920–1939. 1054 pp. Illustrations. Maps. Bibliography. Index. English-language summary. CZK 760,00, cloth.

I. The Discussion of Ukrainian Nationalism in the Czech Republic

The debate on interwar Ukrainian nationalism (which is commonly referred to simply as the "the Bandera movement" or "the Banderites") has been quite dynamic in recent years. Often, it goes beyond academic discussion, moving into the arena of politics, and even of propaganda. In the Czech Republic, we find no exception to the trend. In fact, this Central European state has become a front line for an information war between two opposing belief systems within narratives that can generally be defined as "pro-Russian" or "pro-Ukrainian." Immediately after the Revolution of Dignity (Maidan Revolution), the figure of Stepan Bandera emerged from historical oblivion for some Czech politicians, and the topic of Bandera found its way into the pages of local newspapers, usually framed by myths arising from Russian and Soviet propaganda.[2] Local historians and Ukrainian

[1] All translations in this review are mine.

[2] Perhaps some of the best-known statements in this regard are the ones made by Czech president Miloš Zeman. He has mentioned Bandera on several occasions. In 2015, he commented on the procession on the Maidan, stating that people carrying Bandera's picture had been shouting slogans that included "Death to Poles, Jews, and Communists without Mercy" (see Švec). In 2019, after the Czech minister of foreign affairs had visited Ukraine, Zeman reproached him for "not talking about the Banderites" in Kyiv (see Kopecký).

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researchers also tried to participate in such discussions, placing an emphasis on the importance of further public debate.[3] However, it would be an exaggeration to say that such exchanges were constructive. Recently, and only very slowly, the discourse began to assume a scholarly form.

This situation likely stemmed not only from political and ideological motives but also from the dearth of literature written in Czech on the topic. Indeed, there was a palpable lack of research in the Czech Republic on Ukrainian nationalism. Probably the only exception was the book written in 2008 by local journalist Milan Syruček titled *Banderovci—hrdinové, nebo bandité?* (*The Banderites—Heroes or Bandits?*). Still, this was a non-fiction work that could not be viewed as a fundamentally scholarly study. In recent years, the academic landscape in the Czech Republic has changed owing to the publication of various books dealing with Ukrainian nationalism—either written by Czech historians themselves or representing translations from other languages. The key monographs include *Ukrajinské 20. století: Utajované dějiny* (*Ukraine's Twentieth Century: A History Marked "Classified"*) by Volodymyr Viatrovych (Vjatrovyč); *Volyň 1943: Genocidní čistka—fakta, analogie, historická politika* (*Volhynia 1943: Genocidal Purge—Facts, Analogies, and Historical Politics*) by Grzegorz Motyka; the new study by Czech historian Tomáš Řepa *Banderovci: Politické souvislosti, následky zneužití tématu komunistickou propagandou, návaznost na hybridní konflikt v současnosti* (*The Banderites: Political Context, the Consequences of the Misuse of the Topic by Communist Propaganda, and the Connection with the Contemporary Hybrid Conflict*); and the new research work by David Svoboda (under review) titled *Jablko z oceli: Zrod, vývoj a činnost ukrajinského radikálního nacionalismu v letech 1920–1939*. And even though Ukrainian interwar nationalism cannot be characterized as a priority subject in the Czech academic milieu, some book reviews have also appeared. It should be noted, however, that the tone of the discussion has been heated even among scholars.

Viatrovych's book was one of the first to be targeted for criticism. Milan Skála published a review of it in *Česká pozice* (*Czech Perspective* [Prague]), where he concentrates more on Viatrovych's persona than on the book itself. Viatrovych is accused of having an unbalanced approach and of selectively using his sources—to which he had access as the director of the Sectoral State Archive of the Security Service of Ukraine. One should point out that it was in fact Viatrovych who was responsible for the policy of opening up all of the Ukrainian archives to the public. He contributed greatly to an unrestricted and free access to archival sources, thus discouraging the

[3] An open letter to Zeman criticizing his statements on Ukrainian nationalism was published in the summer of 2014 and signed by Lenka Víchová, Svoboda, Anton Shekhovtsov, and Yana Leontiyeva (see Slezáková).

cherry-picking of sources. Considering Skála's general take on Viatrovych and his book, it is no surprise, then, that in his review, he focuses on nationalism as a problematic phenomenon that creates complications in the international arena. Despite the fact that Viatrovych's book addresses many topics of modern Ukrainian history, the reviewer, it seems, is not interested in undertaking a complex analysis of the book. So, if Viatrovych could be suspected of having prejudice in his approach, some of his critics could be perceived that way as well.

In his review, Skála also mentions the book by Řepa *Banderovci: Politické souvislosti, následky zneužití tématu komunistickou propagandou, návaznost na hybridní konflikt v současnosti*. According to Skála, both Viatrovych's and Řepa's books "caused embarrassment" in certain academic circles. Řepa's work was indeed harshly reviewed in the local journal *Securitas Imperii: Časopis pro studium moderních diktatur / Securitas Imperii: Journal for the Study of Modern Dictatorships* (Prague), which is published by the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes. Review author Vlasta Kordová accuses Řepa practically of dilettantism and of ignoring historical facts; she also analyzes the book on the philological and linguistic levels. Overall, the reviewer demolishes Řepa's study from every angle. What is quite eye-opening is the sharp, and even aggressive, tone of the review. And it is rather difficult to agree with Kordová's general conclusion that Řepa depicts Ukrainian nationalists "as passive victims" (Kordová 329). Without a doubt, Řepa's treatment of the history of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) movement represents one of the weaker aspects of his book, as the subject is not crucial for his explorations—he concentrates much more on the propaganda of a later period (as is clear from the title of the book itself). The chapters dealing with the "information war" surrounding the Bandera movement and focusing on Communist propaganda in Czechoslovakia (see Řepa 119–34) and the modern Czech Republic (see Řepa 209–62) are quite fresh and interesting. This can also reasonably be said about the subchapter on Ukrainian nationalism as a topic of literary fiction during the Soviet period (see Řepa 280–87). Miroslav Tomek is much more delicate in his review of Řepa's book: despite a number of critical remarks, he still identifies some commendatory aspects (some interesting archival sources, at least [Tomek 47]). On a more general note, the Banderites have received positive press within the broader public sphere in the Czech Republic, and even in Slovakia.[4]

We should mention another book and review within the context of this discussion: the Czech translation of Motyka's *Wołyń '43: Ludobójcza*

[4] Non-scholarly reviews have been published, for example, by the journalists Ľubomír Jaško and Jaroslava Šimáková.

czystka—fakty, analogie, polityka historyczna (*Volhynia 1943: Genocidal Purge—Facts, Analogies, and Historical Politics*) and Svoboda's reaction to it published in *Slovanský přehled: Časopis pro dějiny střední, východní a jihovýchodní Evropy / Slavonic Review: Journal for the History of Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe* (Prague). Motyka's studies on Ukrainian nationalism are well known and in Polish historiography are counted among the most comprehensive. Svoboda repeats this information in his review, and there is no absence of complimentary notes in his text. But despite the well-mannered style of Svoboda's review, it is quite critical. Svoboda negatively assesses *Volyň 1943: Genocidní čistka—fakta, analogie, historická politika* on different fronts: he points out inaccuracies in the handling of archival sources (Svoboda knows them very well); he notices Motyka's manipulations in citing the witnesses of events (for example, in the case of Ievhen Sverstiuk's memoirs); and he is aware of Motyka's lack of sensitivity in the treatment of political context. Still, it should be emphasized that regardless of Svoboda's critical assessment, texts such as Motyka's do facilitate wider discussions of the topic. The respect showed by Svoboda in his review is definitely praiseworthy given the raucous nature of debates on controversial historical subjects.

Svoboda himself has provided a complex analysis of the legacy of Ukrainian nationalism. He is the author of the most broad and intricate study to date (at least in the Czech Republic) on interwar Ukrainian history. His book *Jablko z oceli: Zrod, vývoj a činnost ukrajinského radikálního nacionalismu v letech 1920–1939* came out in August 2021 in Prague.

II. *Apple of Steel*

The story of Ukrainian radical nationalism in Svoboda's monograph formally begins with Myroslav Sichyns'kyi's firing of gunshots in Lviv on 12 April 1908 and ends with Bandera's escape from a Polish prison in September 1939. Despite the fact that the title of Svoboda's thousand-page monograph clearly defines the period being examined—that is, 1920–39—the book is actually a wide-ranging presentation of the cultural-political context going back all the way to Taras Shevchenko's *Haidamaky* (*Haidamakas*, 1841). It furnishes a diverse analysis of Ukrainian-Polish tensions during the past centuries and also investigates the development of national identity in central and eastern Ukraine from the nineteenth century up until the Ukrainian Maidan in the winter of 2013–14—when the topics of Bandera and the Ukrainian nationalists cropped up once more in international media.

Svoboda does not avoid politicizing history to some degree. Indeed, he questions and analyzes in a most profound way the modern-day creation of political myths around Ukrainian integral nationalism. It should be stressed,

though, that Svoboda not only deconstructs the myths of Russian propaganda but also makes extremely harsh assessments about the collective West, as according to him, "the world of the 1930s is dangerously similar to the contemporary one" (17), and

> in our digitalized times, we are witnessing a tolerance toward chauvinism when it is carried out by an aggressive world power and a contempt for ordinary civic patriotism when it is demonstrated by a people who are in a precarious international situation and whose identity is fractured. (17)

The author sees the reluctance and inability on the part of the collective West to understand the complicated pages of Ukrainian history as stemming both from the influence of propaganda and from the helplessness of the scholarly milieu, which has been exposed for decades to ideological influences:

> The legacy of the leftist revolt of the 1960s in Western universities has had an extremely destructive effect on the ability to soberly evaluate the materials studied. These universities, in addition to restricting academic freedoms due to ideological demands, have been consistently used in the interests of Russian imperial projects from Brezhnev to Putin in such a way that the perception of the defensive nationalism of non-Russian peoples seeking protection on the side of Hitler has been more severely criticized than the perception of the repressive Soviet machine itself. (449)

The author's harsh categoricalness can certainly cause controversy. To be fair, Svoboda also condemns the opposite extreme, that is, the cases in which Ukrainian radical nationalism has found unconditional and uncritical apologists, especially within Ukrainian émigré circles—and particularly in Canada (449).

Svoboda's approach, which often seems to derive from the field of political, or even philosophical, studies, formulates an important structure for the book. Reproaches of such a "politicization" of history will undoubtedly arise. But it is ostensibly impossible to avoid politicization when dealing with such a controversial subject, given that politicization has de facto accompanied Ukrainian radical nationalism over the past century. Having such a "politicized" approach at least emphasizes the relevance of conducting historical research on niche topics and phenomena in Ukrainian history.

Svoboda's book is, fundamentally, grounded in the story of the Ukrainian nationalists themselves. The author analyzes the evolution of radical nationalist ideas among Ukrainian youth within a broad context, keeping in mind not only Polish policies of the time but also Russian-Soviet influences. The situation of Ukrainians in Eastern Galicia—surrounded by hostile forces and occupants—in many ways resembled a colonial context. Ideological sources underpin the foundation of Mykola Mikhnovs'kyi's analysis in *Samostiina Ukraina* (*Independent Ukraine*, 1900) and of the texts written by

the nationalists themselves—first and foremost, of course, by Dmytro Dontsov, to whom a separate, complex subchapter is devoted here (see 418–42). When the readers of Svoboda's book finally get through the extensive introductory chapters, they will find themselves immersed in the intricacies of interwar Central Europe. The stories of its main actors—Ievhen Konovalets', Ievhen Petrushevych, and Bandera and his faction in the OUN—are the focus of later chapters. All of the figures and vicissitudes of the period are described in as much detail as possible, including the motives, ideological bases, and contexts of the events of the time.

III. The Discussion of Ideology

Perhaps the most interesting part of Svoboda's book is the block of three subchapters in chapter 4 that centre on an analysis of the ideology of Ukrainian radical nationalism: "Evangelista z Melitopolu: Učení a vklad Dmytra Doncova" ("Evangelist from Melitopol: The Teachings and Contribution of Dmytro Dontsov" [418–42]); "Obyčejný Fašismus? Nesnáze s ideologií OUN" ("Ordinary Fascism? The Problems with OUN Ideology" [413–98]); and "Komu zvonila hrana? Nepřátelské státy a národy v představách OUN" ("For Whom Does the Bell Toll? The OUN Perspective on Enemy States and Nations" [499–516]). In this section, Svoboda seems to argue with the points of view of a full spectrum of well-known researchers of OUN ideology—from Alexander J. Motyl and Oleksandr Zaitsev to Grzegorz Rossoliński-Liebe and Motyka. The controversy detailed by the author over several hundred pages and his attempts to deal with the various clichés regarding Ukrainian nationalist ideology deserve special attention.

Svoboda states that the OUN tried to develop a clear and universally appealing, "unideological" nationalism. But such a system cannot function without other components (454). Thus, it is important to constructively parse out the elements of various ideologies that spilled into the world view of OUN members. The most controversial element is, without a doubt, the fascist one. Following his detailed analysis of Dontsov's ideas, Svoboda examines the thesis of the specifically "fascist component" of OUN ideology. The author does not contradict the notion that Ukrainian nationalists found themselves in the "magnetic field of fascism" (454), but he is also not convinced about the "superficial indicators of fascism" (as he puts it) that various researchers, especially John-Paul Himka, use in their arguments (469).

Svoboda, in the end, clearly sympathizes with the approach of Motyl, who is much more restrained in his assessment of the "fascist" direction of the OUN, as is Zaitsev. Both Svoboda and Motyl agree that an institutional system and statehood play a significant role in defining a movement as fascist

(472). A major point of Svoboda's analysis of OUN ideology is his statement about the "reactionary" nature of that ideology—that its development needed to change in reaction to political and military contexts and events. Such ideological flexibility occurred because in the minds of Ukrainian nationalists, ideas were not a "jealously guarded treasure" (459); rather, everything came second to one, singular vision—the creation of Ukrainian statehood. Therefore, over time, not only the ideas but also the allies of Ukrainian nationalists could change depending on the circumstances. Svoboda, like a number of other authors, admits that if history had developed differently, the OUN could have become a fascist entity if it had gained its own state. Such suppositions, however, already enter the realm of historical speculation (498).

A separate subchapter in the book is dedicated to one of the most sensitive and controversial questions in the history of Ukrainian nationalism—the Jewish question (see 517–46). In keeping with the notion of the gradual development of the ideology of Ukrainian nationalism, Svoboda differentiates several levels of anti-Semitic tendencies within the OUN. He states that anti-Semitism (or at least a hostile perception of the Jews) among the Ukrainian population had various sources: social, political, and religious (519). The trial of Symon Petliura's killer, which took place in 1927 in Paris, was a crucial catalyst in the spread of anti-Jewish sentiment within nationalist circles:

> Ukrainian-Jewish relations were deeply damaged by the acquittal. The outcome of the trial pitted two nationalities against each other—two nationalities that at various times each fell victim to the Soviet system. On the defeated Ukrainian side, it contributed to the feeling that the Jews had common interests with Moscow. (523)

It is quite interesting that, according to Svoboda, the Jewish question did not appear in the documents of the Ukrainian Military Organization (UVO) prior to the trial of Samuel Schwarzbard (Samuil Shvartsburd), as the organization did not perceive this question as important (524). Still, the UVO and OUN treatments of the Jewish question differed significantly. The mainstream view was characterized by a slogan defining Jews as "friends of our enemy" (526). As the war approached, the perception of the Jews became gradually more radical, as the ethnic idea was transforming in importance for the OUN ideological leadership. Svoboda, in spite of the complexities inherent in trying to define a single, unified theory regarding the Jewish question inside the OUN, nevertheless makes the following conclusion (one that would hardly be accepted by Ukrainian nationalists today):

> The Jewish question was not judged entirely in its own right, but rather in relation to Moscow, although racial-based theoretical analyses also began

> to prevail (see [Volodymyr] Martynets' and [Iaroslav] Stets'ko). This indicates the existence of totalizing trends in this organization and a tendency to solve the "question" in a radical way. The fact that with the impending war and partly amid the horrors that accompanied it in the East the nationalists exaggerated the problem of ethnicity—which represented no force or potential for resistance—testifies that they were not able to leave their own shadow. (546)

The author, at the same time, stresses the essentiality of historical context when addressing this matter (he does so in other areas as well):

> The collective suspicion imposed on the Jews by the OUN does not reveal very much about the specifics of Ukrainian nationalism per se. Rather, it says much more about the substance from which that nationalism was woven—about the expansive pool of pan-European nationalist and prejudiced egoism within which it existed. (546)

IV. Traces of Czech Influences

Inasmuch as the book under review was written by a Czech author and published in the Czech Republic, it is quite logical that it examines the traces of Czech influences on Ukrainian nationalism. The author's statement that "the ideology of Ukrainian nationalism was formed largely in the lands of the Czech Republic and Moravia" (354) can be observed as somewhat hyperbolic. But there is certainly an element of rational truth in it. Czechoslovakia played an important role in the shaping of Ukrainian interwar nationalism, and Svoboda carefully presents the "traces of Czech influences" in his book. Some of them lead the reader to well-known events, such as the 1920 UVO congress in Prague (according to Svoboda, we can speak about the participation of Konovalets' in this congress "with probability bordering on confidence"); the reader also learns about the almost forgotten attempted assassination of the Polish consul in Prague by Mykola Pazliuk, which occurred in the Smíchov district of Prague (353). In addition, Svoboda studies in detail the history of the Ukrainian nationalist organizations that made up the League of Ukrainian Nationalists in Czechoslovakia, including one small organization called the Union of Ukrainian Fascists. The author emphasizes the marginality of this organization, but he does not shy away from confronting the existence of this type of trend among Ukrainian nationalists (546). The most significant point of intersection between Ukrainian nationalists and Czechoslovakia undoubtedly relates to the story of Carpatho-Ukraine. Indeed, in the vision of Ukrainian nationalists at the end of the 1930s, Carpatho-Ukraine was supposed to become the basis of the future Ukrainian state. Understandably, then, a large, separate subchapter in the book is dedicated to this topic (774–

861), which will certainly be of interest to researchers dealing with this issue or with the history of Carpatho-Ukraine and Transcarpathia overall.

V. Conclusion

Svoboda has a particular public image in the Czech Republic: he is seen virtually as a "defender of Ukraine," or even as an "apologist of Ukrainian nationalists." Such assessments (which we often encounter in similar cases) are not based on an examination of his scholarly works; they result, rather, from the modern-day desire to attribute labels to people. But it is quite possible that future reviewers will look for prejudice in his work or observe there an overly positive attitude toward the Banderites. Svoboda, in one of his interviews, claims that he is "frankly not sure" whether he has written a "pro-Ukrainian" book "[b]ecause I do not know what it is to be 'pro-Ukrainian,' despite the fact that I have repeatedly been accused of this. I am just trying to find the truth, not to support this or that nation" (see Mokryk).

In his studies, Svoboda does exhibit some sympathy toward, or at least some understanding of, the protagonists of his research. However, it would be futile to try to uncover "Bandera apologism" in his *Jablko z oceli.* In the book, Svoboda underscores and analyzes details that are rather uncomfortable for the uncritical supporters of Ukrainian nationalists. For example, he examines the co-operation and financial dealings between the UVO leadership and Bolshevik Soviet Ukraine (340). And in spite of his polemic with Motyka, he does not attempt to absolve Ukrainians of their liability in the Volhynia events; the term "ethnic cleansing" appears on the pages of his book quite often. In addition, Svoboda's conclusions regarding the anti-Semitic legacy of the OUN definitely do not vindicate Ukrainian nationalists. Finally, he does not set aside the chance to criticize the "patriotic historiography" of the radical nationalist movement.

In the interview mentioned above, Svoboda states that he expects his book to be disapproved of by various camps. The discussion surrounding the Ukrainian radical nationalist movement typically involves a polarity and irreconcilability of viewpoints and approaches. Thus, Svoboda's expectations will probably be realized, and the book will receive some critical reviews. That being said, though, there is no doubt that Svoboda's monograph contributes enormously to the scholarly discourse on this very controversial topic. And the author has made a robust attempt to stay balanced in his examinations. Svoboda's *Jablko z oceli* is probably the most complex and in-depth analysis of Ukrainian radical nationalism to date—and not only in the Czech Republic. Moreover, it is a study that is based on an extensive range of archival documents and published literature. This new book is, without

exaggeration, an outstanding research work and a must-read for those who are interested in the subject of Ukrainian nationalism.

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