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Challenges and promises of comparative research into post-Soviet fascism: Methodological and conceptual issues in the study of the contemporary East European extreme right



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ABSTRACT

The international study of fascism has, over the last 25 years, experienced considerable consolidation. Inspired by influential theoretical publications of Roger D. Griffin and others, a new sub-discipline, “comparative fascist studies,” has emerged that proceeds from a largely common conceptualization of fascism. It explicitly includes and particularly promotes the cross-cultural, as well as inter-epochal investigation into ultra-nationalisms outside Central and Western Europe after the year 1945. The concepts, approaches and hypotheses of this new sub-discipline are well-suited to be applied to the study of inter-war and post-Soviet right-wing radicalism in Eastern Europe. However, before comprehensive classification and informative comparison becomes possible, the putative fascist phenomena of Eastern Europe need more thorough descriptive analysis, field research, and empirical investigation by researchers, in the region.

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This special issue contributes to international right-wing extremism studies by way of outlining and interpreting certain episodes in and aspects of the development of nationalist politics of Europe's territorially largest fully European country, Ukraine, in the mid- and late-20th as well as early 21st centuries. The papers below focus on – what could be called – Ukrainophone radically right-wing ideas and groups in Ukraine, during and after the Soviet period. That means that this collection largely leaves aside Russophone, pan-Slavic, Eurasian and other pro-Moscow right-wing tendencies on the territory of today's Ukrainian state (Umland, 2013a). The latter is, as the recent escalation in the Donets Basin illustrated, also a relevant topic for an understanding of current Ukrainian history (Mitrokhin, 2014; Kuzio, 2015; Osipian, 2015). Yet, it arguably constitutes a separate topic that, because of its close connection to developments inside Russia, is better explored within the context of Russian nationalism and extremism studies (Laruelle, 2015; Mitrokhin, 2015) – and less so within Ukrainian studies. When speaking about nationalism, the extreme right, fascism and others in Ukraine, these terms refer almost always only to the liberationist, anti-Tsarist, anti-Soviet, anti-Muscovite and often ethno-nationalist section of Ukrainian far right politics.

Such a narrow focus on the Ukraine's radical nationalists seems to be justified as the peculiar permutations of Ukrainian right-wing radicalism of the interwar and war-time as well as post-Soviet periods have been insufficiently studied in comparative perspective so far (Umland, 2013a). More recently, these topics have become hotly debated issues in communist and post-communist studies as well as in Ukrainian public discussions (Amar et al., 2007; Himka, 2011a;

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Katchanovski, 2014). In 2014, moreover, all of the various themes covered in the present paper collection – whether they regard the 1920s–1950s, or the post-Soviet period – have, in connection with Russia's annexation of Crimea and covert intervention in the Donets Basin, also entered Russian as well as Western mass media reports, European intellectual discourse, East-West political dialogue, and even international diplomacy (Shekhovtsov and Umland, 2014; Risch, 2015).

The contributions to this special issue do not directly tackle Russia's peculiar “war” of information, interpretation and allegation around Ukrainian nationalism that started in 2014, if not before (Fedor, 2015). Nevertheless, they should help to contextualize and rationalize the debate around Ukraine's historic and contemporary radical right by way of adding empirical detail, comparative analysis, interpretative assessment and knowledge-based judgment to earlier important contributions by, among others, in chronological order, Armstrong (1980), Motyl (1980, 1985, 2010b, 2013), Golczewski (1993, 2003, 2010, 2011), Zaitsev (2000, 2013a,b, 2014, 2015), Kasyanov (2003), Bruder (2006), Rudling (2006a,b, 2011a,b, 2012a,b, 2013), Shekhovtsov (2007, 2011b, 2013, 2014), Himka (2010, 2011b), Likhachev (2010, 2013a,b,c,d), Rossolinski-Liebe (2011, 2014a,b, 2015), Hrytsak et al. (2013), and Polyakova (2014a,b,c, 2015a,b,c).¹ There is also a large body of published further Ukrainian-language research on the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and Ukrainian Insurrection Army (UPA), which is partly listed in the bibliography of Zaitsev's seminal *Ukrainian Integral Nationalism* (2013a). While a considerable part of this literature is neither entirely dilettante nor overtly apologetic, most of these investigations are driven not by a critical approach, but by nationalizing motives. Numerous are informed by, or even contributing to, a discursive context dominated by hagiographic attitudes to the leaders of these organizations, if not by cognitive dissonance concerning the OUN's leaders' documented thoughts and known acts. Many of these writings are thus, in spite of their impressive size, unsuitable as secondary sources, but could instead constitute objects of discourse-analytical explorations of the historic and political thought of Ukraine's intellectuals and diaspora (Rudling, 2011b; Rossolinski-Liebe, 2014b).

The papers below contribute Ukrainian observations to cross-cultural research into international right-wing radicalism as well as to the historical study of the rise and fall of inter- and post-war ultra-nationalism. Setting the stage for the empirical investigations that follow, this essay is not a survey of their contents, findings and implications – something left to be assessed by future reviewers. Instead, my introduction is introductory in a more literal sense in briefly sketching out the evolution and current state of the theory and terminology on fascist ideas, movements, parties and regimes against the background of the re-emergence of the East European extreme right, after the end of the Cold War. The overview stops before the following papers were written, and provides a background for, rather than summary of, the here collected investigations.

To be sure, one could also embed the following empirical papers into the context of conceptual frameworks of social and historical science fields other than comparative fascism. Such additional areas within which it would also make sense to position the below essay collection include, among others:

- Ukrainian studies (German: *Ukrainistik*),
- party system studies (*Parteienforschung*),
- research into social movements (*Bewegungsforschung*),
- the history of ideas (*Ideengeschichte*),
- comparative nationalism (*vergleichende Nationalismusforschung*),
- antisemitism research (*Antisemitismusforschung*),
- extremism studies (*Extremismusforschung*),
- research into populism (*Populismusforschung*),
- comparative right-wing radicalism (*vergleichende Rechtsradikalismusforschung*),
- the political religion approach (*politischer Religionsansatz*),
- totalitarianism studies (*Totalitarismusforschung*),
- cross-cultural authoritarianism (*vergleichende Autoritarismusforschung*),
- racist attitudes research (*Erforschung rassistischer Einstellungen*),
- xenophobia research (*Erforschung von Fremdenfeindlichkeit*), and others.

I have chosen to focus below on some particulars of the evolution of comparative fascist studies during the last two decades. This topic can be seen as a sub-discipline of the broader field of historical and contemporary far right studies – a research area of which the exploration of historic and neo-fascism is merely one part.

Anton Shekhovtsov has recently (2015), in a succinct way, summarized the interrelationship between the various terms used in, as well as the taxonomic hierarchy of, this research realm, in the following simple graph:

¹ Further relevant earlier contributions, in chronological order, include: Kuzio, 1997, 2007; Berkhoff and Carynnyk, 1999; Dymerskaya-Tsigelman and Finberg, 1999; Kubicek, 1999; Kulyk, 1999, 2014; Solchanyk, 1999; Snyder, 2003; Ivakhiv, 2005; Fedorenko, 2013; Katchanovski, 2013; Khiterer, 2013; Vasylychenko, 2013; Belitsker, 2014; Risch, 2015. For additional references, see the extensive footnotes in Umland (2013c).

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