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# Elusive Proteus: A study in the ideological morphology of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists



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## ABSTRACT

This article studies the ideology of Ukrainian nationalism applying a model of “ideological morphology” to the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN). Using nationalist press and archival materials, the author analyzes core and peripheral concepts of OUN's ideology. The findings reveal that in 1930s – early 1940s the morphological structure of OUN's ideology was fascist. However, after 1943 some peripheral concepts came to substitute the fascist core, which led to a splinter within the OUN and subsequent democratization of the one on its factions. The study offers theoretical explanations of ideological metamorphosis applying a constructivist approach.

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Change shapes with Proteus for advantages,  
 And set the murderous Machiavel to school.  
 William Shakespeare, Henry VI

## 1. Repeated sequence: conceptual and memorial hindrances in fascist studies

Since its first entry to European politics, fascism has attracted vivid scholar interest, which later contributed to the development of fascist studies. However, analysis of the abundant literature on fascism shows that fascist studies suffer from two kinds of epistemological hindrances: the first is conceptual, and the second is memorial. Both hamper considerably the ability to identify a certain socio-political phenomenon as “fascism”, though each has a different origin.

First, the conceptual hindrance appears when scholars try to conceptualize “what fascism is” and “what fascism is not”. Since 1945, fascist studies experienced successive phases of growth and decline of interest. These fluctuations are closely related to scholarly debates concerning the nature of fascism: whether it is right or left (Lipset, 1960; De Felice, 1976; Sternhell, 1987; Mosse, 1999), whether it is reactionary or modernizing (Turner, 1972; Abelshauser and Faust, 1983; Eley, 1983; Antliff, 2002; Betts, 2002), whether fascism encompasses the phenomenon of German National-Socialism (Sauer, 1967; Burleigh and Wippermann, 1991; Sternhell et al., 1994; Kershaw, 2012). Each debate contributed significantly to

increasing interest in fascist studies, but each side's unwillingness to concede resulted in stalemate or “dialogues of the deaf”,<sup>1</sup> causing subsequent declines of academic interest.

This article is not a historiographic one. Therefore it is not intended to study all the “fascist controversies” in detail. Nevertheless, the latest controversy, lurking beneath the “(manufactured) consensus within fascist studies” is a significant one. In early 1990s Griffin introduced a lucid – and now fashionable – definition of fascism as “a palingenetic form of ultra-nationalism” (1991, 32)<sup>2</sup>. The contribution itself stimulated a revival of scientific interest in generic fascism, and a number of publications examining fascism as palingenetic ultra-nationalism have appeared. An unequivocal seductiveness of the generic approach resides in its promise to conceptualize the essence of fascist ideology, and, therefore, to provide a solid definition of the phenomenon.

Adherents to functionalism, however, contested the validity of the generic approach. The disagreement is primarily methodological<sup>3</sup>: the latter tends to consider fascism as an ideology, ascribing to it some ineliminable or, at least, rather stable components. The former prefers to understand fascism as a political movement, situating it in a nexus of political struggle, thus emphasizing the versatility of the fascist value-system and the negotiability of fascist practice (Paxton, 1998). Putting bluntly, at the heart of the controversy is a question whether ideology matters for understanding the nature of fascism, or ideological statements are nothing more than strategic rhetoric.

Second, to complicate the situation even further, fascist studies suffer from a memorial hindrance. Due to the trauma of World War II, fascism was branded as “the Evil”; for this reason national communities (and, consequently, national scientific communities) aimed to prove that they had not been touched by the *mal du siècle*, or – in case of incriminating evidence – there had been some extenuating circumstances.

The French case of historic hindrance is notorious: there was a large-scale controversy concerning the fascist character of nationalist organizations and politicians of the inter-war period (Berstein, 1984; Julliard, 1984; Sternhell, 1987; Irvine, 1991; Soucy, 1991; Passmore, 1995; Goodfellow, 1999; Burrin, 2003; Dobry, 2003). Generally, French scholars attempted to prove the non-fascist character of the above-mentioned actors, so that the French national community would not be blamed for its fascist past. Though other national cases were less remarkable, there were heated discussions about the (fascist) nature of Salazarism or Francoism (Pinto, 1995; Linz, 2000). During the discussions, those who denied the fascist experience of a respective national community pointed to the particularities of Salazarism, Francoism, and the other phenomena, arguing that they were too distinct to be recognized as fascism.

Both hindrances complicate significantly the efforts to analyze the ideology of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (hereafter – the OUN), sometimes described as fascist. Due to the conceptual hindrance, it is difficult to characterize the OUN's ideology as fascist since it remains unclear what fascism is. Due to the memorial hindrance, the majority of OUN studies bear the imprint of a *polarized* narration – a recurrent circulation of two opposite historiographic tendencies: the invective and the heroic. The invective tendency presents the OUN as a chauvinist organization willingly committing the most egregious crimes, such as terrorism in the inter-war period, Holocaust complicity, and massacres of Poles in Volhynia (Maslovsky, 1999; Semiriaha, 2000; Voitsekhovsky and Tkachenko, 2001). The heroic tendency presents the OUN as a patriotic organization fighting invaders of all kinds in order to liberate the subjugated Ukrainian people (Chopovsky, 1996; Zavedniuk, 2000; Hermakivsky, 2001.).

The polarized narration hybridizes OUN studies with emotional qualifications. Therefore, it impedes a balanced analysis of the OUN's ideology and complicates conceptualizations of its relation to fascism. Moreover, because within the framework of polarized narration, equating OUN's ideology with fascism is a trademark of the invective tendency, moderate scholars make efforts not to use the notion of fascism while studying the OUN (Motyl, 1980; Kulchytskyi, 2005; Zaitsev, 2012). Nevertheless, such a precautionary use of the term “fascism” clearly points out the pitfalls of memorial hindrance.

In this paper, I present a study of the OUN's ideology following theoretical insights of Freeden (1996), Griffin (1996), and Eatwell (1996). This research departs from previous work on the OUN in several ways. First, rather than considering the OUN's ideology as a homogeneous structure, I investigate the political concepts it was composed of. Second, having examined the OUN's ideological core, I study its peripheral structural concepts and their political functions. Next, I call into question the essentialist understanding of the OUN's ideology describing it as constant during the period of 1929–1954. Finally, I offer a constructivist approach to study the OUN's ideology which helps to capture some of the reasons behind the elusive nature of the OUN's ideology.

## 2. Core analysis: morphological structure of political ideologies

In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein introduces the notion of a “blurred concept”, exemplified by the idea of a game. It is hardly possible to give a stable definition of a game separating accurately games from all the other forms of human

<sup>1</sup> The phrase itself was used to describe the different periods of fascist controversies (Kallis, 2004, 32; Berstein, 2007, 243–246). This characteristic seems to be emblematic and to reveal sentiments towards irreconcilable though heated discussions.

<sup>2</sup> Details of Griffinian approach are discussed in Section 2.

<sup>3</sup> Identifying the methodological core of the generic-functionalism controversy, I express my solidarity with A. Kallis who also discerns two approaches: “one, that is rooted in the history of ideas and cultural trends that deals with fascism as a coherent, diachronic intellectual system, regardless of its subsequent adaptations and distortions in practice; the other... with a heavy emphasis on examining the political choices that movements and regimes made” (2004, 11).

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