



**Echoes of the Past in Contemporary Politics:  
the case of Polish-Ukrainian Relations**

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SEI Working Paper No 87

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First published in October 2006  
by the **Sussex European Institute**  
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**Echoes of the Past in Contemporary Politics: the case of Poland and Ukraine**

## Abstract

This article examines the influence of the shared Polish-Ukrainian past on contemporary politics in both countries, with the emphasis on Poland. It argues that despite sporadic appearances to the contrary, the past is much less important to most political parties than might be assumed. The spotlight is on Poland since media coverage in Poland seems to indicate a higher level of past influence on contemporary politics than is actually the case. Its structure is as follows. Section one very briefly reviews what historical events continue to cause controversy in the Polish-Ukrainian past. It then looks at the evidence of commemorative ceremonies and investigates why these have the capacity to upset relations between the two countries. Section two examines what precise impact the past has on Polish politicians and political parties, and discusses how and why the situation differs in Ukraine.

# **Echoes of the Past in Contemporary Politics: the case of Polish-Ukrainian Relations**

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Enlargement of the European Union has brought it new neighbours. As attention in Brussels turns to the formulation of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), which will regulate relations between the Union's eastern and southern neighbours, the spotlight has been cast on the relationship between the two largest east-central European states: Poland and Ukraine.

Despite sharing a violent history, over the past decade, Poles and Ukrainians have forged a dynamic strategic partnership, which despite all its documented faults<sup>1</sup> remains the strongest bi-lateral alliance between a Member State of the Union and an eastern neighbour. Beginning as a bi-lateral relationship at the presidential level, rooted in the ideals of Jerzy Giedroyc, Juliusz Mieroszewski and the Paris *Kultura* circle,<sup>2</sup> the partnership has evolved qualitatively during the past couple of years into an important local bond between communities on both sides of the border, complemented by close ties between cities in all regions of Poland and Ukraine. This change is very important in the framework of the ENP, since its success or failure will ride on the ability of local communities on the fringes of the Union to work together productively enhancing prosperity on both sides of the Union's borders.

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<sup>1</sup> Kataryna and Roman Wolczuk have written extensively on the subject of Polish-Ukrainian relations. See: Kataryna and Roman Wolczuk, *Poland and Ukraine: a strategic partnership in a changing Europe?* Chatham House: London, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> *Kultura*, the Paris-based leading Polish émigré journal edited by the late Jerzy Giedroyc, was the leading advocate of close relations with Ukraine as a bulwark against Russia from the 1950s to the 1990s. Although much of Giedroyc's thinking was original, especially his early acceptance of the Yalta borders of Poland, to a certain extent his thinking drew on the earlier works of Włodzimirz Bączkowski, particularly: *O Wschodniach Problemach Polski* [reprint of pre-1939 works], Ośrodek Myśli Politycznej: Kraków, 2002.

Press coverage in Poland and western Ukraine on the relations between the two states tells a different story. What has made the news in western Ukraine and particularly in Poland over the past five years, are the multiple, though sporadic occasions when memories of a violent shared past erupts onto contemporary politics, causing consternation to even the most accomplished of diplomats. As Tadeusz Osuchowski, the Polish consul in the western Ukrainian city of Lviv remarked, his is ‘arguably the most sensitive posting’<sup>3</sup> held by any Polish diplomat.

The research question this article investigates is: how and to what extent does the past influence contemporary relations between Poland and Ukraine? The dependent variable is Polish-Ukrainian relations; the independent variable is the contemporary picture of the shared Polish-Ukrainian past, as depicted in some of Poland’s liberal, national print media.

The primary data on which the article’s findings are based are as follows: quality, liberal Polish print media – and to a lesser extent, the Ukrainian print media; public opinion polls conducted by CBOS;<sup>4</sup> and in-depth interviews conducted by the author during field research in Warsaw, Lviv, Przemyśl and Lublin between 2002 and 2004.

It argues that despite sporadic appearances to the contrary, the past is much less important to most political parties than might be assumed. The spotlight is on Poland since media coverage in Poland seems to indicate that relations with Ukraine continue to be viewed through the prism of history.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Author interview with Tadeusz Osuchowski, Polish Consul, Lviv, 11 May 2004.

<sup>4</sup> *Polska, Europa, Świat. Opinia publiczna w okresie integracji*, CBOS, Warsaw, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> This has begun to change since the Orange Revolution of 2004 that brought Viktor Yushchenko to the Ukrainian Presidency. However, it is perhaps still too early at the time of writing (July 2005) to comment on whether this has greatly altered the media coverage of Ukraine in Poland. In 2002, 2003 and 2004, around 30 per cent of articles dealing with Ukraine focused on historical issues. This figure is taken from a survey of three widely read, quality, national Polish news weeklies: *Wprost* (<http://www.wprost.pl/>), *Polityka* (<http://polityka.onet.pl/>), and *Newsweek Polska* (<http://newsweek.redakcja.pl/>); and two widely read, quality, national newspapers: *Rzeczpospolita* (<http://www.rzeczpospolita.pl/>) and *Gazeta Wyborcza* (<http://www.gazeta.pl/>). The proportion was slightly lower in *Wprost* and slightly lower in *Polityka*.

Moreover, at the outset, there is evidence to suggest that there is a fundamental imbalance in the Polish-Ukrainian relationship in terms of the level of interest in each country.<sup>6</sup> For Poland, relations with Ukraine are a matter of importance to the whole nation, whereas interest in Poland is chiefly confined to western Ukraine, and to a lesser extent, Kyiv.<sup>7</sup> This imbalance between Poland and Ukraine may be explained by several factors: first, expellees from what is now Ukraine and their descendants, both Poles expelled by the Soviet Union, and Ukrainians moved to the recovered territories<sup>8</sup> during Operation Vistula in 1947<sup>9</sup> are present in every region of Poland; second, relations with Ukraine and indeed all of the former Polish ‘*kresy*’ in the east, including Lithuania and Belarus, touch on the sensitive issue of what kind of state Poland is, and what Poland means. This is a complicated matter, but for nearly all of its history until 1945, Poland or whatever state(s) Poland happened to find itself in, was a composite state, of different ethnicities and religions, of which arguably the Polish and Roman Catholic element was usually the most dominant, but in which western Ukraine was always an integral part. Not only did most of the drama of Poland’s pre-1945 history take place in these eastern territories, but also – especially after vast level of destruction within the borders of contemporary Poland during the Second World War – western Ukraine, and particularly Lviv, is an important repository of the architectural treasures of Polish culture. Finally, the landscape of western Ukraine and the other ‘*kresy*’ is perhaps more important to Poland’s sense of national identity than the recovered German territories in the north and west. The loss of these eastern territories is for Poland an even greater national trauma than the loss of the eastern provinces was to Germany in 1945.

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<sup>6</sup> Author interview with Yaroslav Hrytsak, Professor of History at the Ukrainian National University, Lviv, 24 August 2004. This point has also been made by the Polish political scientist Zdzisław Najder.

<sup>7</sup> These regional differences within Ukraine with regard to interest in Poland were mentioned were mentioned in several interviews carried out by the author in Lviv, western Ukraine: Yaroslav Hrytsak, Professor of History at the Ukrainian National University, Lviv 24 August 2004; Andrej Pavlyshyn, journalist at the *Lvivska Hazeta*, Lviv, 10 May 2004; and, Taras Voznyak, Advisor in the Regional Administration, Lviv, 10 May 2004. An examination of the archives of the Ukrainian national newspapers *Den* (<http://www.day.kiev.ua/>) and *Ukrainska Pravda* (<http://www2.pravda.com.ua/>) corroborates this, especially when contrasted with the western Ukrainian newspaper *Lvivska Hazeta* (<http://www.gazeta.lviv.ua/>), which regularly features articles on Poland and Polish affairs.

<sup>8</sup> The euphemism for the regions of post-1945 Poland acquired in the north and west at the expense of Germany, as compensation for Poland’s significant losses to the Soviet Union in the east.

<sup>9</sup> *Akcja Wisła* in Polish, the enforced expulsion of the Ukrainian population from south eastern Poland and their subsequent deportation to the Soviet Union, or dispersal around the fringes of post-1945 Poland.

The structure of the article is as follows. Section one very briefly reviews what episodes from the Polish-Ukrainian past tend to crop up in media discourse and are the source of controversy and debate. It then looks at the evidence of commemorative ceremonies and investigates why these have the capacity to upset relations between the two countries, touching on the issue of why the impact of the past is lesser in Polish-Ukrainian relations than between similar countries in Central Europe region such as the Czech Republic and Germany, or Poland and Germany. Section two examines what precise impact the past has on Polish politicians and political parties, and discusses how and why the situation differs in Ukraine. It also examines the standpoints of Polish political parties on Ukraine, to contextualise how important the shared past is to them in the context of the Strategic Partnership. It subsequently concludes.

#### I. How does History Influence the Present: commemorative ceremonies

Whittling six hundred years of shared history down to the bare bones, the events of the past that continue to intrude the most on the present in Polish-Ukrainian relations are as follows: Bohdan Khmelnytsky's 17<sup>th</sup> century uprising against the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth of the Two Nations; the struggle for the control of the borderland between the infant Polish and Ukrainian states in the aftermath of the First World War; the treatment of the Ukrainian minority in Poland between the wars, and the growth of Ukrainian paramilitary organisations; finally, and most controversially, the ethnic cleansing of Polish and Ukrainian minorities from areas of mixed settlement during and after the Second World War.

These particular areas, which constitute the public narratives of the Polish-Ukrainian shared past, have been selected not only for the coverage they have received in the media in Poland and western Ukraine over the past few years. Their continued capacity to influence the present suggests that they are of crucial importance to understanding not only what lay behind the thinking of those who first mooted the idea of a Polish-Ukrainian Strategic

Partnership,<sup>10</sup> but also in explaining the popular mutual perceptions that influence the public's opinion of the Polish-Ukrainian relationship.

This article does not attempt a historical analysis of the Polish-Ukrainian past, since this lies out of the scope of the political scientist's interest.<sup>11</sup> Rather it examines those occasions when history impacts on contemporary society, specifically contemporary politics. Disputes over history can arise appear in a range of phenomena: in the writing of school textbooks, in media debates over historical events, in party politics and patterns of voting on certain issues, and in the commemoration of past events. This last category is the focus of this article.

Paul Connerton<sup>12</sup> examined the commemorative ritual as part of his study of the collective memory and remarked that its importance goes beyond the national myth because it involves participation and because the rigidity of the ritual prevents much alteration by subsequent generations. The most obvious example of this in contemporary Western society is the Roman Catholic mass, its fundamental ritual almost unchanged for two millennia. It is also worth noting that changes in rituals provoke the most resistance: during the English Reformation it was the stripping of the altars and the change from a Latin liturgy to an English one in 1549 that provoked rebellion – not the Act of Supremacy nor

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<sup>10</sup> Katarzyna and Roman Wolczuk, *Poland and Ukraine: a strategic partnership in a changing Europe?* Chatham House: London, 2003, p. 36.

<sup>11</sup> Scholars with an interest in the Polish-Ukrainian past may wish to read the following books. As an excellent overview in English: Timothy Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus 1569-1999*, Yale, 2003. A good bibliography of the interwar years may be found in Eugeniusz Koko, 'Polska historiografia o relacjach Polsko-Ukraińskich w latach 1918-1939', *Historycy Polscy i Ukraińcy wobec Problemów XX Wieku*, Kraków, 2000. An overview of the historiography is available in: Grzegorz Motyka, 'Problematyka stosunków polsko-ukraińskich w latach 1939-1948 w polskiej historiografii po roku 1989', *Historycy polscy i ukraińcy wobec problemów XX wieku*, Kraków, 2000. On the struggle for the borderland between 1918 and 1920: Maciej Kozłowski, *Miedzy Sanem i Zbruczem*, Krakow, 1990; Michał Klimecki, *Polsko-Ukraińska wojna o Lwów i Wschodnia Galicja 1918-1919 r. Aspekty polityczne i wojskowe*, Warsaw, 1997. Kozłowski argued that a war could have been avoided, Klimecki is more sceptical, arguing that, given the paramount importance of Lwów/Lviv to both the Polish and Ukrainian national identities, there was little chance of avoiding armed conflict. Also of interest is: Szporluk R., 'Polish-Ukrainian Relations in 1918: Notes for Discussion', in Latawski P. (ed.), *The Reconstruction of Poland 1914-23*, London, 1992, pp. 41-54. On the Polish-Ukrainian intercommunal violence of 1943, the literature is partisan, however, for some something in English on this, see: Terles, Mikołaj, *Ethnic Cleansing of Poles in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia 1942-46*, Toronto, 1993. Also of interest is: Siemaszko, W. and E., *Ludobójstwo dokonane przez nacjonalistów ukraińskich na ludności polskiej Wołynia 1939-45*, 2 vols, Warsaw, 2000.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Connerton, *The Collective Memory*, Princeton, 1989.



the dissolution of the regular clergy. People resist being forced to observe alien rites, enacting a rite inevitably involves giving assent to its meaning.<sup>13</sup> Rituals and commemorative ceremonies forge a bond between the performers or participants and the event they are remembering; they provide a direct link between the living and the dead.

Ancient rites and rituals present relatively few problems of execution and content, they are passed down from one generation to another without too much questioning; indeed the problems begin if present generations attempt to tamper with them, since this inevitably involves a change in the ritual's meaning for participants or observers. It is the creation of new rites and commemorative ceremonies that causes real problems – in essence, this is the problem the Polish and Ukrainian foreign policy elites experienced initially in seeking to impose from above the commemoration of a politically expedient version of the Volhynian tragedy of 1943. Before launching into this, a very brief description of what took place in Volhynia in 1943 is useful.

In the summer of 1943, with the German army retreating from the Soviet Union, ethnic tensions in the Polish-Ukrainian borderlands boiled over. German forces garrisoned the towns and cities, but did not have the troops to control the countryside. The situation in the countryside was chaotic: the Polish Home Army was fighting both German forces and Ukrainian insurgent army (the UPA); Soviet partisans were also in operation. Amidst the confusion that ensued within this power vacuum, it is hard to know where the order came from to attack Polish civilians. The campaign was excessively brutal: it aimed to exterminate Poles living in Volhynia and what before 1939 had been eastern Galicia. Estimates of how many Poles living in the countryside died vary between 60,000 and 400,000. Since many Poles living in this area had already been deported to Siberia by the Soviet occupiers in 1939-41, by the end of the war, in some country areas the Polish population had been wiped out. Ukrainians from outside the structures of the nationalist army also took part in the massacres, in some cases those who refused to do so were killed. The response of Polish forces resulted in the death of 15,000 to 20,000 Ukrainians.

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<sup>13</sup> Connerton, p. 44.

Despite the focus of the Polish and Ukrainian political elite and media on the use of the word 'genocide' to describe the Volhynia massacres, it is too easy to present the disagreement over the commemoration of the Volhynia massacres as a simple dichotomy between Polish and Ukrainian interpretations of the past. Although the presidential administrations of both states shared the view that the event should be jointly commemorated, and treated as a tragedy of both the Ukrainian and Polish nations, Polish public opinion certainly did not share this view.<sup>14</sup> To understand the nature of public opinion on this issue, it is useful, first, to distinguish the two opposing sides of the argument, and second, to explore the details of issues that divided the two sides, and to finally offer some remarks on what this means for future Polish and Ukrainian reconciliation.

The boundaries of the argument were determined in both Poland and Ukraine – broadly speaking - by the two most vocal groups with very different versions of what happened in 1943, and how this should be commemorated. At one extreme stand the die-hards, who refuse any form of reconciliation with the other side: the far right of Polish and Ukrainian politics, including in their ranks a minority of veterans of both the Polish Home Army and the Ukrainian Partisan Army. In 2003, Ukrainian veterans sealed their side of the border in advance of the ceremonies to be held in Ukraine to prevent the Polish veterans from crossing the border. At the other end stand the liberals, inheritors of the ideals of the émigré journals *Kultura*, in Polish, and *Suchasnist*, in Ukrainian – they can count in their ranks the overwhelming bulk of the foreign policy community in both countries. Liberals fervently believe in the Polish-Ukrainian strategic alliance as a strengthening force for good in the region, and as the cornerstone of an overall policy that aims to overcome centuries of enmity. The great majority of the general public and parliamentarians in both countries hold a position somewhere between the two extremes, and are open to persuasion by either

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<sup>14</sup> According to a CBOS poll carried out in Poland around the sixtieth anniversary of the Volhynian tragedy in July 2003, 41% believed that Poles alone were the victims; 5% believed that both Poles and Ukrainians were victims; only 1% thought that Ukrainians were victims. Unfortunately, no similar polls were carried out in Ukraine at the same time. Although such data cannot be compared fairly with a quantitative poll such as the CBOS poll of July 2003, all the Ukrainian interviewees questioned by the author in spring 2004 held the view that in 1943 both Poles and Ukrainians were victims. See: *Rocznica Zbrodni na Wołyniu – Pamięć i Pojednanie*, CBOS BS/117/2003, Warsaw, July 2003. <http://www.cbos.pl>

group. For both liberals and die-hards, the issue of the Volhynia commemoration is test of what sort of countries contemporary Poland and Ukraine would like to be.

The issues that divide the two sides are clear cut: the Ukrainians believe the commemoration to be weighted towards the Poles, since no mention is made of the persecution of the Ukrainians by the Polish state between 1918 and 1939, nor of *Akcja Wisła*, the enforced expulsion of Ukrainians from their ancestral lands in south eastern Poland and the Carpathians by the Polish, Czechoslovak and Red Armies in 1947; many Poles believe the massacres in Volhynia in 1943 to have been nothing short of genocide. Estimates as to the number of victims vary wildly. Poles and Ukrainians both have a collective memory of themselves as innocent victims, rather than the perpetrators of crimes. Under foreign rule, both Poles and Ukrainians drew parallels between their nations and the sufferings of Christ on the cross. That a nation can be both victim and oppressor is a concept that is only very recently emerging in Poland and Ukraine; therein lies the heart of the problem. If the Volhynian commemoration was a form of Ukrainian *Jedwabne*<sup>15</sup>, some have argued that the Ukrainians narrowly passed the test, perhaps more narrowly than the Poles over *Jedwabne*, but ultimately the western Ukrainian public did overall acknowledge that Ukrainians also committed atrocities during the Second World War. This is an important sign that Polish-Ukrainian reconciliation and cooperation goes beyond the elites and filters down beyond the elite to society as a whole.

Although the Volhynia commemoration was perhaps the most explosive of all the Polish-Ukrainian rows since 1991 – almost certainly because it is not possible to level the charge of genocide without generating a massive public outcry – it is certainly not unique. It is worth briefly mentioning the other explosive issues here, which were mentioned by Kataryna and Roman Wolczuk in their 2003 pamphlet *Poland and Ukraine: a strategic partnership in a changing Europe*. Since the early 1990s, both Ukrainians and Poles have sought to reassert their historical presence on either side of the border. The two most

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<sup>15</sup> The *Jedwabne* debate in Poland, which reached its height in 2001 centred on the publication of a book by Jan Tomasz Gross, *Neighbours*, about the massacre of 1,600 Jews of the town of *Jedwabne* in 1941, which was carried out not by the German security services, but by their Polish neighbours. The parallels with the inter-communal violence in the Polish-Ukrainian borderlands in 1943 are clear. Jan Tomasz Gross, *Neighbours*, Princeton, 2001.

celebrated cases of this are the restoration of the former Greek Catholic cathedral in Przemyśl to Ukrainians in 1991, and the dispute over the official ‘reopening’ of the *Cmentarz Orląt* in Lviv which was an open sore in Polish-Ukrainian relations for much of the 1990s.

The Pope’s 1991 decision to return the former Greek Catholic cathedral in Przemyśl with its distinctive dome to the Greek Catholic church was met with fierce resistance by local Polish nationalists, some of whom were veterans of the Polish-Ukrainian conflicts of the 1940s, who erected barricades and organised a hunger strike. In the face of this resistance, the Pope backed down and handed the Greek Catholic community the so-called ‘Garrison Church’ – a building of no significance to the Greek Catholic community. In 1996, the distinctive Greek Catholic dome of the cathedral was removed ‘for safety reasons’, although it seems more likely that local hard line anti-Ukrainian Roman Catholics want to expunge memories of a shared Ukrainian past from the town’s skyline.<sup>16</sup>

What is usually referred to as the ‘re-opening’ of the *Cmentarz Orląt*, was agreed upon in 1999 by the national administrations of Poland and Ukraine. The term ‘reopening’ is rather misleading, since the cemetery had been ‘open’ for several years. What was really meant was an official ceremony of reconciliation, attended by the presidents of both states, and designed to demonstrate that both sides had decisively put the past behind them. What the Polish press termed reopening of this military cemetery was in some respects *the* issue for Polish-Ukrainian relations in the 1990s. For such an important issue, a very brief background note is necessary.

The cemetery was originally constructed during the period of the Polish Second Republic to commemorate the Lwów ‘eaglets’ who had been killed in the struggle with the Western Ukrainian Republic in the aftermath of the First World War. After the city passed into Soviet hands in 1944, the cemetery was neglected for over forty years, and fell into a considerable state of disrepair. After 1989, the Polish government requested the right to

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<sup>16</sup> Kataryna and Roman Wolczuk, *Poland and Ukraine: a strategic partnership in a changing Europe?*, Chatham House: London, 2003, p. 68.

restore the cemetery, which was granted by the Ukrainian authorities. At the end of the 1990s, the cemetery had been restored in way that reflected its troubled history. Moreover, a memorial to the Ukrainians who had fought for independence from Poland and the Soviet Union had been constructed beside the Polish war graves.

The proximity of these war graves appeared to present the Polish and Ukrainian presidential administration with an ideal opportunity for a formal reconciliation ceremony, commemorating the dead on both sides. This plan foundered when the city authorities of Lviv refused to participate in the national government's plans. This move has frequently been interpreted as evidence of residual anti-Polish feeling in western Ukraine. Whilst there is a certain amount of anti-Polish sentiment in the region, there is some evidence to suggest that the decision to veto the commemorative ceremony with the Poles was less the result of the local council bowing to public opinion, than a ploy of frustrated local politicians to make a bid for the national political scene in what turned out to be a publicity coup.<sup>17</sup> It allowed Lviv's politicians to present themselves as true Ukrainian patriots who would not compromise with the Poles unless they consented to the restoration of the graves of Ukrainian partisans in south eastern Poland, with the inscription 'Warrior for a Free Ukraine' on the gravestone. Unwilling to give any more attention to a group of politicians the Kyiv presidential administration considered as 'rabble rousers', the presidential administration backed down with the excuse that 'there is no point for the president to be bothered by a local issue'. A few months later, a joint mass was celebrated by Poles and Ukrainians in the cemetery by the cardinals of both the Roman and Greek Catholic churches, proof that the issue is not something that really upsets Ukrainian public opinion in Lviv to anything like the extent that is suggested by the Polish media.<sup>18</sup> The explanation for the success of this locally organised ceremony of reconciliation in contrast to the failure of the nationally organised event may lie in the fact that participation in a such a ceremony entails giving assent to its meaning. If a participant feels he or she has some 'ownership' of a commemorative event, and it does not appear that reconciliation is being imposed from

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<sup>17</sup> Author interview with Yaroslav Hrytsak, Professor of History at the Ukrainian National University, Lviv, 24 August 2004.

<sup>18</sup> See: 'Greek, Roman Cardinals Pray for Deceased Ukrainian, Polish Soliders', this is available from the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv's archive: <http://www.ucu.edu.ua/eng/current/chronicles/article:215/>

above, it seems plausible to conclude that such an event is more likely to take place without causing controversy.

Nonetheless, the Polish media does appear to have a tendency to over-dramatise disagreements between Poles and Ukrainians. A good example of this was the release of the 1999 dramatisation of Henryk Sienkiewicz's *Ogniem i Mieczem* (With Fire and Sword). Initial reports of the film's reception in Ukraine in the Polish press pointed to a negative reception in Ukraine. As it later emerged, the film's western Ukrainian detractors had not seen the film, but were critical of it because it was based on a novel by Sienkiewicz. For these western Ukrainian critics, *Ogniem i Mieczem*, brought back memories of compulsory Polish schooling for Ukrainians in the novels of Sienkiewicz between the wars. The vocalism of this minority disguised the true success of the film until the revenues began to roll in, revealing the true reaction of the Ukrainian public, especially in eastern, central and southern Ukraine.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, it could be argued that the Polish media expects conflict in Polish-Ukrainian relations and therefore tends to overstate the views of a vocal minority, especially when traumatic events are being commemorated.

Two observations can be made about the power of commemorative events to influence contemporary politics. First, as has been observed above, what seems to cause controversy – and can provide politicians with a stick with which to beat their opponents – is the perceived hijacking of a commemorative event by the government and a concomitant attempt to impose an official, sanitised view of the past on the public, which ignores local sensitivities. In all of the above-mentioned instances, where Poles and Ukrainians have refused to take part in government-orchestrated commemorative ceremonies, it is because – as Connerton observed previously - they will not give their assent to the meaning of the ceremony because they felt they were being exploited by the government for the sake of political expediency. Second, the prospect of financial compensation for damages suffered in the past adds a certain spice to official commemorative ceremonies, and can draw out the process of reconciliation, since one side is unwilling to forgive the other so long as it

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<sup>19</sup> Author interview with Yaroslav Hrytsak, Professor of History at the Ukrainian National University, Lviv, 24 August 2004.

believes it may have something to gain from holding out for ‘justice’. In the Polish-Ukrainian case, the former certainly applies as the success of the locally organised ceremony of reconciliation over the official presidential ceremony in the affair of the *Cmentarz Orłąt* illustrates. The latter does not apply in the Polish-Ukrainian case, since neither Poles nor Ukrainians hold out any hope of receiving anything beyond symbolic compensation from the other.<sup>20</sup> Both Poland and Ukraine are relatively poor countries, certainly in comparison with the Federal Republic of Germany and there is no prospect of any government funds ever being available on either side to make such payments. Moreover, there is no legal basis for any compensation to be made, since a joint agreement was signed between the pro-Soviet Lublin government of Poland and the Soviet Union to the effect that each state would undertake to compensate its own deported citizens. However, the relative poverty of the Polish and Ukrainian governments should not be discounted, since both Poles and Ukrainians could claim that an agreement made – under duress – between People’s Poland and the Soviet Union need not necessarily prevent citizens of the third Polish republic from making a claim against the government of independent Ukraine and vice versa. It should be remembered that the descendents of German expellees have attempted to make claims on properties held by their parents or grandparents, despite the payment of compensation to such victims by the government of the Federal Republic of Germany in the 1950s.

## II. The Past in Contemporary Politics in Poland and Ukraine

When considering the impact of the past on contemporary politics it is easy to draw simplistic conclusions. As the case of the *Cmentarz Orłąt* shows, there is far more going on behind the scenes than actually meets the public eye in media footage of a very public spat between Poland and Ukraine. The same is true of the heated debates at the time of the Volhynia commemorations in the Polish and Ukrainian parliaments. The Poles and Ukrainians appeared to disagree amongst themselves as to how the event was to be commemorated by both parties – if indeed it were to be commemorated at all. If one simply

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<sup>20</sup> Author interview with Volodymyr Sereda, Head of the Organisation of Ukrainian Expellees, Lviv, 27 August 2004.

looks at the rhetoric of the debate – that is the key issue of the use of the word genocide - at first glance, one could receive the false impression that the shared bloody history of the Poles and Ukrainians in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is a huge powder keg that the Polish and Ukrainian governments are doomed to sit upon, knowing that it could explode with only the slightest provocation.

There is an important difference between political rhetoric and action on both the Polish and Ukrainian sides. During the debate in the Polish *Sejm*, the opposition to the joint statement on the massacres of 1943 was led by Jarosław Kaczyński, leader of the Law and Justice party, supported by the more right wing League of Polish Families, and the Peasant Party. At the time of the debate over the period of 9-10 July 2003, Kaczyński stated: ‘All that took place in Volhynia sixty years ago was *genocide in the most explicit meaning of the word*, a large-scale genocide’<sup>21</sup> [author’s own italics]. However, despite this tough talk, the result was an overwhelming victory for the government, with 325 votes for the motion, 35 against and 14 abstentions. The votes against the motion came largely from the League of Polish Families. Kaczyński, the clear leader of the opposition, was not in the 35 who voted against, he and his party abstained. Whilst Polish politicians will not shy away from patriotism, which can also attract votes for a conservative party, they do not allow this patriotism to interfere with the serious and pragmatic business of building excellent relations with their neighbours. The same is true in Ukraine. Those local Lviv politicians,<sup>22</sup> who were so strident in their refusal to allow for a ceremony of national reconciliation between Poland and Ukraine, are the same politicians who today are urging Polish businesses to invest in their region, and who are such enthusiastic supporters of cross border cooperation.

It would be wrong to present a cynical picture of Polish and Ukrainian politicians, whose patriotism runs only skin deep, because this is not true. The influence of the past on contemporary politics is a complex matter. Another reading of the voting behaviour of Kaczyński and Law and Justice during the Volhynia debate could be that they abstained

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<sup>21</sup> RFE/RL NEWSLINE, vol. 7, no. 130, Part II, 11 July 2003.

<sup>22</sup> Author interview with Andrej Pavlyshsyn, *Lvivska Hazeta*, Lviv, 10 May 2004.



precisely because they understood that Polish-Ukrainian co-operation and goodwill today is so important in overcoming the legacy of their bloody past. Therefore, they would not take any action that could damage Poland and Ukraine's Strategic Partnership. Nonetheless, as good Polish patriots, they could not bring themselves to vote for a motion that did not make an explicit reference what they believe to be the genocide of the Polish people, carried out by Ukrainian partisans. The only action that remained open to them was abstention.

A plausible explanation for the tough talk of Polish and Ukrainian politicians when confronted with the unpleasant reminders of their shared past lies somewhere between patriotism and cynical opportunism. In fact, Polish and Ukrainian politicians are capable of being opportunistic and patriotic at the same time.

Attitudes towards the past are fluid. Consequently, the influence of the past on the present varies over time. In Poland, despite the residual antipathy towards Ukrainians exhibited amongst public opinion *as a whole*,<sup>23</sup> when asked about what policy Poland should pursue toward Ukraine, public opinion tends to correlate with the official position shared by nearly all the political parties.<sup>24</sup> Amongst informed public opinion, there is a strong feeling in Poland that the Volhynia massacres are a Ukrainian *Jedwabne*.<sup>25</sup> In simple terms, unlike Poland, Ukraine has never had the experience of being on the side of the oppressor, and of

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<sup>23</sup> According to the CBOS barometer of Polish attitudes towards other nationalities, religions and ethnic groups, between 1993 and 2003 - with the exception of Romanians - Ukrainians are the group Poles most dislike. When asked to choose between sympathy, indifference or dislike in their feelings towards Ukrainians, 55-70% of Poles expressed dislike, 20-25% expressed indifference, and only 10-20% expressed sympathy. The number of Poles expressing sympathy fell slightly at the time of the Volhynian commemorations. When asked whether reconciliation between Poles and Ukrainians is possible, between 1997 and May 2004 on average 35-40% of Poles said that it was impossible. These sets of opinions have changed since the Orange Revolution of 2004; one third of Poles now express dislike, one third sympathy, and one third indifference. In December 2004, 81% of Poles felt that reconciliation with Ukrainians was possible. Whether this will remain so in the longer term remains to be seen. See: *Polska, Europa, Świat: opinia publiczna w okresie integracji europejskiej*, CBOS: Warsaw, 2005, p. 89; and, *Wpływ Ostatnich Wydarzeń na Ukrainie na Stosunek Polaków do Ukraińców*, CBOS BS/190/2004, Warsaw, December 2004. <http://www.cbos.pl>

<sup>24</sup> In 2002, 53% of Poles were in favour of Ukrainian accession to the European Union; 14% were opposed and the rest either did not know or had no opinion. See: Joanna Konieczna, *Polacy-Ukraińcy. Polska-Ukraina. Paradoksy stosunków sąsiedzkich*, Instytut Sociologii: Uniwersytet Warszawski, 2002, p. 25.

<sup>25</sup> *Jedwabne* is a village in Poland that was inhabited by Catholics and Jews until July 1941 when its Jewish inhabitants were murdered, not by Nazi *Einsatzgruppen*, but by the non-Jewish inhabitants. This historical revelation prompted a difficult debate in Poland on what it meant for Poland and Poles to be both the perpetrators as well as the victims of atrocities during the Second World War. See Jan Tomasz Gross, *Neighbours: the Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne*, Princeton, 2001, for more information.

having to admit that in its history, it was not always the victim, and it also made horrific mistakes. There is a consensus between the foreign policy community and Polish informed public opinion that this is a necessary step for Ukraine to take. However, this is only just beginning to happen in Ukraine, as the debate over what happened in Volhynia in 1943 has shown. An ability to come to terms with the past, and not always to take a defensive position, could be considered an indicator of how secure a nation feels with its place in the world and its past, because it takes a great deal of confidence to undertake such an act. In the present Ukrainian situation, where society is only just beginning to stagger out of the economic collapse of the 1990s,<sup>26</sup> this is probably quite far off.

Some commentators have argued that the Volhynia debates of 2003 signalled that the influence of the past on Polish-Ukrainian relations is likely to increase in the next few years. 2004 was the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the beginning of the expulsion of Ukrainians from People's Poland, and of the Poles from the Soviet Union. The argument is that with so many of these commemorations due between 2004 and 2007 – the anniversary of Operation Vistula – the spotlight will inevitably fall on the negative aspects of the Polish-Ukrainian relationship's shared past. It seems unlikely that any mainstream politician in Poland or Ukraine is likely to use these events to make political capital.

Ukraine's president since the beginning of 2005, Viktor Yushchenko, has continued the policy of his predecessor, Leonid Kuchma, and placed relations with Poland and the European Union at the top of the foreign policy agenda. In contrast to Kuchma, his government has gone beyond mere integration with the EU 'by declaration' and has made concrete progress. Foreign policy was not a matter of consensus in the presidential election campaign between Yushchenko and his more pro-Russian opponent Viktor Yanukovich. It would be a gross simplification to state that either candidate had a totally pro-Russian or a totally pro-European Union policy, but each candidate gave a clear indication of what future direction he would broadly like Ukraine to follow. Ukraine's past does continue to have some impact on contemporary Ukrainian politics, but precisely what historical

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<sup>26</sup> Even at the current robust annual growth rate of 6-7% per annum, predictions for Ukraine are that it will not reach its 1989 level of GDP until 2012.

narrative is of importance varies from region to region. For example, President Viktor Yushchenko, most popular in the western part of the country, when standing opposition candidate for the presidency in 2004, had to distance himself from Ukrainian nationalists to avoid being tainted by his then rival Yanukovych's camp with the slur of being involved with a group that collaborated with the occupying German army during the Second World War. In eastern and southern Ukraine, home to many Red Army veterans, any link with an anti-Soviet group can cost votes.<sup>27</sup> However, this is unlikely to be the case in western Ukraine.

It could be argued that Poland and Ukraine's shared past is unlikely to cause any major ruptures between Warsaw and Kyiv in the medium term. Since President Yushchenko remains very popular in western Ukraine – the area where the Polish-Ukrainian shared past tended to flare up during the Kuchma era – his foreign policy and attitude towards the past is not only more sensitive to local opinions, but in the earlier phase of the presidency he was given the benefit of the doubt by local politicians. The open hostility towards the President of Ukraine in the western part of the country that characterised the Kuchma years has largely evaporated. In short, public confidence and trust in Viktor Yushchenko – at any rate in western Ukraine – has allowed him to resolve outstanding disagreements (such as over the joint reopening ceremony of the *Cmentarz Orłąt*) and 'close' some of the most awkward areas of the shared Polish-Ukrainian past. Thus as with most controversial political decisions, an hostile public can be won over by a leader who has won public trust and support.

### Conclusions

The shared Polish-Ukrainian past, and the commemoration of its conflicts loomed large in Polish-Ukrainian relations during the 1990s and around the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This article has argued that commemorative ceremonies cause the greatest controversy in Polish-Ukrainian relations, since participation in them on the part of the public implies giving

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<sup>27</sup> To give an indication of the level on which this sort of discussion is carried out, the Yanukovich camp were quick to introduce a play on words equating 'Nashism' (from the name of Viktor Yushchenko's block *Nasha Ukraina* [Our Ukraine]) with fascism.

assent to their meaning. It is for this reason that until recently<sup>28</sup> presidential attempts to orchestrate ceremonies of reconciliation failed, whilst locally organised commemorations between Poles and Ukrainians have succeeded.

Disputes over their shared past between Poles and Ukrainians have not caused as much controversy as, for example, in German-Polish relations or German-Czech relations. The principal reason for this is the scarcity of property claims from Polish or Ukrainian refugees and their descendants. Without this material element, the wounds of the past tend to heal more quickly. It is not implied that the demands for historical justice on the part of German expellees are motivated solely by a desire for the restitution of their confiscated property, or for financial compensation. However, it cannot be denied that the prospect of material gain raises the stakes in the historical debate over the rights and wrongs of the deportations of 1945-46. Since neither the Polish nor Ukrainian states have the kind of resources available to make compensation a possibility in the foreseeable future, the case has not arisen and disagreements over the past between Poles and Ukrainians have never acquired the same potency as in German-Polish relations.

Without being haunted by the spectre of compensation claims, strenuous efforts at the official bi-lateral level and at the local level in Poland and Ukraine have wrought a strong Strategic Partnership between both countries. Whilst this is not immune to upset, especially during the commemoration of traumatic historical events, it is now sufficiently deeply rooted to survive the sporadic, malignant influence of a painful shared past on the present.

Vociferous anti-Polish or anti-Ukrainian minorities exist in Poland and Ukraine, and these groups often speak with a disproportionately loud voice. Periodically, they manage to distort the mutual image of Poland and Ukraine in the media of both countries, although this is particularly the case in Poland. The importance of history in the Polish-Ukrainian partnership is highly unbalanced. This is because an interest in the shared Polish-Ukrainian

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<sup>28</sup> The long-awaited 're-opening' finally came on 24 June 2005 in a ceremony that included both presidents and the local people of Lviv. It is likely that the election of Viktor Yushchenko as the new Ukrainian president, sworn in in 2005, greatly facilitated the ending of this dispute. RFE/RL NEWSLINE Vol. 9, No. 120, Part II, 24 June 2005.

past is present across all Poland, whereas interest in Ukraine is limited to the western portion of the country – the scene of the struggle for the borderlands between Poland and Ukraine in the first half of the twentieth century.

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