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RUSSIA, UKRAINE TRADE HARSH WORDS OVER HISTORICAL MEMORY

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On December 14 Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) issued a strongly worded statement complaining of "open nationalist, anti-Russian, and Russophobic feelings and developments in Ukraine." Attempts are being made, it claimed, to "use difficult periods in our joint history to receive brief political rewards based on doubtful ideological pretensions."

The number of historical issues dividing Ukraine and Russia continues to grow and aggravate the already strained relations between a reformist Ukraine and a resurgent, autocratic Russia. In late November both countries exchanged diplomatic notes after the Eurasian Youth Movement (EYM), a Russian nationalist group proscribed in Ukraine, destroyed an exhibition at the Ukrainian Embassy in Moscow marking the 1932-33 famine.

The Ukrainian side described the vandalism as "provocative and anti-Ukrainian." One month earlier the EYM had destroyed Ukrainian national symbols on Hoverla Mountain in western Ukraine and launched cyber attacks that shut down the presidential website. Since December 9 the servers supporting the orange youth NGO (www.maidan.org.ua), the Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group (www.khpg.org), and the Ukrainian Helsinki Human Rights Union (www.helsinki.org.ua) have all faced sustained attacks.

Valentyn Nalyvaychenko, chairman of the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU), called upon his Russian counterparts to "not permit on each other's territories extremist and, God forbid, terrorist actions, which are undertaken by such structures." Reportedly officials foiled a terrorist attack that had been planned to coincide with a "Russian march" in Crimea's capital Simferopol. The banned group Proryv, with underground branches in the Crimea and ties to extreme left and pan-Slavic groups, was suspected of being behind the planned

provocation, which would have been blamed on “Ukrainian nationalists.”

Ukraine and Russia have embraced differing interpretations of key historical events and personalities since the late Soviet era. The divergence continued under presidents Leonid Kravchuk and Leonid Kuchma (1991–2004), with a return to Ukrainian national historiography, which had been banned in the 1930s but kept alive in the Ukrainian diaspora.

The process has become more heated with the rise of Ukraine’s President Viktor Yushchenko and Russia’s Vladimir Putin. Yushchenko has actively sought to investigate the “blank pages” of Ukrainian history, while Putin has returned to a neo-Soviet synthesis of Russian imperial and Soviet ideology in historiography and national symbols.

Some of the most heated debates have occurred around two primary issues: Ukrainian leaders and independence movements and crimes committed by the Soviet regime in Ukraine.

New Ukrainian symbols, holidays, and commemorations have prompted protests from Moscow. For example, the Tsarist and Soviet regimes regarded 18th century Cossack Hetman Ivan Mazepa to be a traitor, and the Russian Orthodox Church excommunicated him. But he is a hero in Ukraine. Mazepa’s face appeared on Ukraine’s currency in 1996, Kyiv’s Sichnevo Povstannia street was renamed after him in October, and a new monument is planned. The Ecumenical Synod of the Russian (“Ukrainian”) Orthodox Church in Ukraine denounced the monument plans.

An October 9 decree outlined detailed instructions to commemorate the 300th anniversary of the Battle of Poltava, where a combined Swedish–Ukrainian force led by Mazepa lost to Russia. The 1709 battle is seen as a turning point that transformed Russia into an empire. Ukraine lost autonomy and was eventually absorbed into the Russian empire under Empress Catherine II. A monument unveiled to her in October in Odessa sparked violent clashes between Russian and Ukrainian nationalists.

A December 13 decree contained plans for commemorating the 90th anniversary of Ukraine’s declaration of independence from the

Tsarist Empire next year. A monument to Symon Petliura, who led the drive for Ukrainian independence after the Russian Revolution, was vandalized in Poltava, his home region.

World War II also remains a divisive issue. A new monument to the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalist leader Stepan Bandera, assassinated by the KGB in Munich in 1959, was vandalized after it was recently unveiled in Lviv.

An October 12 presidential decree outlined instructions to local authorities about how to commemorate the 65th anniversary of the formation of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), a nationalist guerrilla force that fought a decade-long war against Nazi and Soviet forces.

Another presidential decree awarded the “Hero of Ukraine” designation to UPA commander Roman Shukhevych on the centennial of his birth. The decree noted Shukhevych’s “individual contribution to the national-liberation struggle for liberty and Ukrainian independence.” The Russian Foreign Ministry’s December statement specifically complained that Pushkin Street in Lviv had been renamed after Shukhevych.

Kyiv’s efforts to honor the victims of Soviet crimes have also irritated Moscow. While Yushchenko supported the opening of a new Museum of Soviet Occupation in Kyiv, the Russian MFA complained that Ukraine was attempting to “nationalize” the suffering experienced by all Soviet peoples in the 1932–33 famine. The head of the Ukrainian MFA press service responded by advising his Russian colleagues that it was too late to discuss whether the famine was “genocide,” as Ukraine had already taken this step. “I would like to advise my Russian colleague,” he offered, that they should “read historical books” and “on this basis reach a conclusion.”

Russia’s ambassador to Ukraine, Viktor Chernomyrdin, Foreign Ministry, and media have all condemned Ukraine’s designation of Stalinist crimes and the famine as acts of genocide. The two sides have opposite views on Stalinism (see EDM, November 30) and Russia, as the legal successor to the USSR, is also concerned at possible future demands for compensation. In late November Ukrainian nationalist parties sent an open letter to the president

and parliament demanding that Ukraine seek compensation from Russia through the European Court of Human Rights.

As the two countries move in separate directions, the individuals branded as traitors in Tsarist, Soviet, and post-communist Russia are increasingly becoming Ukraine's national heroes.

(Ukrayinska pravda, May 12, August 29, November 17, 20, 24, Kyiv Post, October 31, Novosti, March 15, president.gov.ua, mfa.gov.ua, mid.ru)