

Centenary (Ukraine)

By [Yuliya Yurchuk](#)

In Ukraine, commemorations of the centennial of the First World War were sporadic and mainly had a grassroots character. There were no large-scale state-organized events and regional authorities were not interested in or had no resources for implementing the state's recommendation to organize commemorations. The main remembrance of the First World War was undertaken by academic historians.

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Introduction

The First World War is just starting to take shape in [Ukraine's](#) cultural memory. Ukrainian historian Yaroslav Hrytsak argues that the First World War is not only a “forgotten but also un-understood war” in Ukraine.^[1] Ukraine's commemorative space has been almost exclusively focused on the Second World War for the last twenty-five years. This can be explained by the fact that the politics of memory in Ukraine has mainly concentrated on questions related to state- and nation-building, on the one hand, and attempts to distance the Ukrainian historical narrative from the Soviet one, on the other hand. In the Soviet Union, the memory of the Second World War was an important tool for

forging a distinctive Soviet identity. Hence, in independent Ukraine, the Second World War has been used to distinguish Ukrainian from Soviet narratives of the war. Most of the historical writing and memory politics in Ukraine after 1991 take the perspective that the nation is the main actor and subject of history. Such an approach is especially problematic when dealing with the history of the First World War, as Ukrainians took part in different formations on opposing sides (the [Russian Empire](#) and [Austria-Hungary](#)), as the state of Ukraine did not yet exist in its present form.^[2]

Leading up to the Centenary

Ukrainian memory culture about the First World War is in a formative phase in which the country is “discovering” the war’s role in its history. This memory culture is martyr-centric, national, and highly dependent on local grassroots initiatives. The Ukrainian state’s approach to the memory of the First World War is illustrated by the absence of a special section about the war on the website of the Institute of National Memory, the state institution that presents the official view of the past. Instead of a section on World War One, there is a special section on the “Ukrainian revolution 1917-1921” and a site entitled “100 years of struggle. Ukrainian Revolution 1917-1923.”^[3] On this website, there is a map of historical sites in Kiev, which includes some related to the war. Although these sites are presented under the heading of the “Ukrainian Revolution” they still, even if implicitly, direct attention to the events of the First World War.^[4] More explicit approaches to the memory of the First World War can be found at the local and grassroots rather than national level.

In the 2000s, new tendencies in memorial practices appeared in some regions in Ukraine. New monuments commemorating the First World War were built in the western borderlands of the country. [Jay Winter](#) claims that in Eastern Europe where states and national leaders are not able or willing to shape the memory of the First World War, the families of those who experienced the war are doing this work.^[5] This is not the case in Ukraine as the memory of World War One has been revived almost 100 years after the events, when the memories saved by families had virtually perished with the last witnesses. Nevertheless, local communities in small Ukrainian towns and villages launched the process of World War One commemoration.

The western regions of the country are the most engaged in the formation of the memory of the First World War because of the particularities of their memory culture. Memory actors there tend to present the region as the bedrock of the Ukrainian nation. Thus, in western Ukraine, the war is remembered in connection with “national revival.” The memory of the [Ukrainian Sich Shooters](#) plays an important role in this regard. Considered the progenitors of the Ukrainian army, the Ukrainian Sich Shooters were formed in 1914 by Ukrainians who served in regular Austro-Hungarian troops. They included about 2,500 men who fought for Austria-Hungary until the end of the war.^[6] After Ukraine gained its independence in 1991, the country started a first wave of decommunization. Largely in the west of the country, streets attesting to Soviet legacies were renamed with more nationalistic names. “Sich Shooters” became a popular street name, making the military formation one of the most

remembered Ukrainian actors of the First World War.

Prominent initiatives leading up to the celebration of centennial took place in the Trans-Carpathian region which was formerly part of Austria-Hungary. Hundreds of thousands Ukrainians died in the ranks of the Austro-Hungarian army. Just after the war, many monuments were built in villages in memory of those who never returned from the war. When Soviet rule came to the Trans-Carpathian region, these monuments were destroyed as they were reminders of the region's non-Soviet past. After Ukraine gained its independence in 1991, the destroyed monuments were slowly recovered. Remarkably, these initiatives were supported by local communities, not state institutions. In some villages, it took more than a decade to collect the money necessary to reconstruct old monuments or build new ones. By the 2000s, some of the old monuments had been reconstructed and many new monuments had been built in Trans-Carpathian villages.^[7] Most often these monuments were quite simple with pronounced religious symbols and dedicated to the remembrance of specific victims: the soldiers from those villages who had died in battle.

Other west Ukrainian regions, Volhynia and Halychyna (Galicia), also took a lead in commemorating World War One. In 2011, one of the main battles, the [Brusilov Offensive](#), was commemorated for the first time when a monument was consecrated in memory of its 95th anniversary in the Volhynian village of Rozhyshe.^[8] In the same vein, a monument to the Horodetsk battle was unveiled in 2011 in the Galician village of Horodetsk in the military cemetery where soldiers from both the Austrian and Russian armies are buried. This monument was presented as a unifying element in Ukrainian history. Local historian Oleh Krystyniak commented on its opening:

The monument will remind to the present and future generations of Ukrainians in the East and the West of the country about the need of understanding, responsibility, wisdom, that our unifying factor should be our common achievements and victories and not the fratricide war.^[9]

The revival of the [memory of World War One](#) spread from villages and towns to bigger cities. For instance, in 2015 Serhii Tkachov, a local historian in Ternopil, organized the construction of a monument to the youngest Ukrainian soldier of the war, [Myroslav Lutsyshyn \(1908-1943\)](#). Lutsyshyn served as a medical aid in the military hospital and on the Russian and [Italian fronts](#) from 1915-1918. He was killed in 1943 during the German occupation.^[10] The monument thus brings together the memory of two great wars that crossed one human life.

Remembering the Centenary

Taking into account the local and regional initiatives described above, national commemoration of World War One came quite late. Discussions about the national memory of World War One began in 2013 and were conditioned by the approaching centennial of the war. The presidential order on “Commemoration of the centennial of the beginning of the First World War” was drafted in March 2013.^[11] It encouraged administrations in all regions of Ukraine to organize some commemorations

devoted to the war. Looking at the activities organized at the state level, it appears that these commemorations were not very substantial. Local administrations were not interested in organizing commemorative activities. There are several explanations for this: on the one hand, the central authority did not specify what such commemorations could include and who would be responsible for their organization; on the other hand, regional administrations had to find their own resources for organizing commemorations. Given the harsh economic crisis Ukraine faced after 2014 due to the annexation of Crimea, and the ongoing military conflict in the east of the country, regional administrations prioritized other expenditures. As a result, commemorations were sporadic and dependent on the personal initiatives of memory actors (mainly museum workers) in different parts of the country, as discussed below.

Museums, Academia, and the Public

Scholars were active in the process of reviving the memory of World War One. In 2016, the Center for Urban History in [Lviv](#) organized a special exhibition about the city's experience of the First World War. The coordinator of the exhibition was [Oksana Dudko](#), a historian who specializes in the period. In the summer of 2016, the Center for Urban History also hosted an international conference on the history of the First World War where historians from Ukraine and abroad shared their research findings. Together with the exhibition, the conference became a way to remember the First World War.

Just after the Center of Urban Studies' conference, Lviv hosted the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies and the International Association for the Humanities' (ASEEES-MAG) international congress. There, a number of panels were devoted to the First World War in Eastern Europe. These became a platform for discussions about the wartime experiences of the population who lived in the region's big cities as well as the discrepancies in [historiography](#) on the [Western](#) and [Eastern](#) Front, with the former being much more extensively researched than the latter. Scholars spoke about the need to focus on Eastern Front experiences and to study the Eastern Front from a comparative perspective, which would enrich understanding of both fronts.^[12] In such a way, the scholarly community significantly contributed to reviving public interest in World War One and drawing attention to the "forgotten" war.

It is difficult to speculate about the public's response as large-scale public commemorations of the war did not occur. The National Museum of History of Ukraine in the Second World War, the state museum which is fully dedicated to military history, made only one mention of the First World War in its space which includes several floors and hundreds of square-meters of exhibitions. This mention is neither an exhibit nor part of one. Rather, it is one dark map under glass labeled "World War I" and placed in a corridor between large halls with the exhibitions dedicated to the Second World War and the memory of the Euromaidan protests in 2013-2014 and the subsequent war in the east of Ukraine.^[13] Despite the official name of the museum which mentions only the Second World War, the museum shows Ukrainians' participation in other conflicts in exhibitions titled "Ukrainians in

others' wars," but even there the First World War is absent.

Conclusion

Celebration of the centennial of the First World War was largely absent in Ukraine. The war continues to be "forgotten" in the country where the memory of the Second World War and the Ukrainian Revolution takes center stage. The main actors who commemorated the First World War in Ukraine between 2014 and 2018 were academic historians who, through their professional activities, led discussions about the history of the war and organized a special exhibition dedicated to the centennial.

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Notes

1. ↑ Hrytsak, Yaroslav: Nezrozumila viyna. Retsenziyi na knyhy i konferentsiyi pro Pershu svitovu (Un-understood war. Reviews on the books and conferences about the First World War), in: Ukraina Moderna 23, 2016, online: <http://uamoderna.com/md/hrytsak-unintelligible-war> (retrieved: 23 January 2020).
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3. ↑ Ukraïns'ka revolutisiia 1917-1921 (Ukrainian revolution 1917-1921), in: Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance website, online: <http://memory.gov.ua/page/ukrainska-revoljutsiya-1917-21> (retrieved: 31 January 2020).
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5. ↑ Winter, Jay: Commemorating catastrophe. Remembering the Great War 100 years on, in: Matériaux pour l'histoire de notre temps, 1/113-114 (2014), pp. 166-174.
6. ↑ Dudko, Oksana: Sich Riflemen, in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2014-10-08. DOI: [10.15463/ie1418.10145](https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.10145).
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8. † Na Volyni vshanuvaly Skoropadskoho i Nakhichevans'koho (In Volhynia Skoropadskyi and Nakhichevans'kyi were commemorated), in: Istorychna Pravda, 19.06.2011, online: <http://www.istpravda.com.ua/short/2011/06/19/43124/> (retrieved: 31 January 2020).
9. † Na Lvivshchynni vidkryly obelisk soldatam Pershoyi svitovoi (In Lviv region the memorial was unveiled in honour of soldiers of the First World War), in: Istorychna Pravda, 12.09.2011, online: <http://www.istpravda.com.ua/short/2011/09/12/54618/> (retrieved: 31 January 2020).
10. † The monument is pictured here: Ruda, Oksana: U Ternopoli vshanuvaly naimolodshoho soldata Pershoyi svitovoi viiny (In Ternopil the youngest soldier of the First World War was commemorated), in: Istorychna Pravda, 30.08.2015, online: https://zaxid.net/u_ternopoli_vshanuvali_naymolodshogo_soldata_pershoyi_svitovoyi_viyi_n_1363_669 (retrieved: 31 January 2020).
11. † Ukraina vidznachatyme 100-richchia Pershoyi svitovoi viiny (Ukraine commemorates the centennial of the First World War), in: Istoruchna pravda, 25.03.2013, online: http://www.istpravda.com.ua/short/2013/03/25/117986/view_print (retrieved: 31 January 2020).
12. † For a short summary of the events dedicated to the history of the First World War which took place in Lviv in the summer of 2016, see: Betliy, Olena: Discussion, in: Ukraina Moderna 23 (2016).
13. † Author's visit in September 2017.

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