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UCLA's Jared McBride on the Dark Side of Ukrainian History

By James Thornton Harris, a features editor for the History News Network

Jared McBride, an Assistant Professor in UCLA's History Department, sat down with *HNN* to discuss his research into 20th century violence in Ukraine. McBride specializes in the regions of Russia, Ukraine, and Eastern Europe and his research interests include nationalist movements, mass violence, the Holocaust, interethnic conflict, and war crimes prosecution. His research has been funded by Fulbright-Hays, the Social Science Research Council, the Mellon Foundation, and the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation and has been published in *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, *Journal of Genocide Research*, *The Carl Beck Papers*, *Ab Imperio*, *Kritika*, and *Slavic Review*. At present, McBride is completing a book manuscript titled *Pathways to Perpetration: Violence and the Undoing of Multi-Ethnic Western Ukraine, 1941-1944* that focuses on local perpetrators and interethnic violence in Nazi-occupied western Ukraine.

Q. In 2017 you wrote an article for *Haaretz*, a leading Israeli newspaper, which condemned the “mythmaking” attempts in Ukraine (then led by President Poroshenko) to “whitewash” the involvement of nationalist Ukrainians in WWII in terrorism against Jews and members of the Polish minority in Western Ukraine. Now some six years later, the government of Ukraine is headed by Volodymyr Zelensky. In recent years, have Ukrainian museums or local municipalities begun to acknowledge the role of local people in supporting the Nazi invaders in WWII?

Many scholars assumed the government of President Zelensky, which posited itself as centrist and outside the usual divides in the Ukrainian political landscape, would mark a break in the more cynical memory politics regarding 20th century history employed by the Poroshenko government. Until the start of the new war in 2022, this appeared to be true. Crucially, one of the most common barometers for policy shifts concerning the past is how the often-controversial Institute for National Memory is staffed and how they orient their projects. In this case, Zelensky clearly opted for a more moderate and respected leader and inclusive projects meant to bridge divides, rather than create them. How the Russian invasion will ultimately shape these politics moving forward remains to be seen. Concerning museums and municipalities, the assessment remains mixed. The aforementioned Decommunization Laws led to the removal of many Soviet-era markers, which is certainly understandable, but the replacement of them with monuments to individuals who served in Nazi-led battalions and police forces has been met with less sympathy.

Still, it is important to note the latter does not represent most of the new memorialization efforts, many of which include important and non-controversial Ukrainian figures from the last two centuries. In terms of other prominent and public spaces, we find similar tensions and growing pains. More controversial spaces like the Prison on Lonksoho in L'viv continue to operate, whereas Ukrainians have made progressive efforts to mark spaces in commemoration of where other ethno-national groups lived and died on Ukrainian soil. I'd therefore like to highlight the prolific work of Rivne-based NGO [Mnemonics](#), which has completed projects like memorializing the site of the Jewish ghetto and even laying steppingstones ([Stolperstein](#)) throughout the city, among a great deal of other work. Finally, the fate of the endlessly byzantine process around the [Babyn Yar](#) commemoration project in Kiev remains to be seen, but it should say a lot of about the future treatment of these issues in a new Ukraine.

Q. How did you first get interested in this subject?

During my first year of college at Northeastern University, I took a course taught by Professor Jeffrey Burds that focused solely on the Second World War on the Eastern Front. This course highlighted various aspects of the war in the East including the intelligence front, partisan movements, local collaboration, the Holocaust, ethnic cleansing, and sexualized violence. In doing so, Dr. Burds exposed undergraduates to cutting-edge research on these topics through his own path-breaking work and that of others. When I took the course in the late 1990s, the field of study was rapidly developing so it was the perfect time to be exposed to these themes.

Shortly after the course ended, I began studying Russian and I followed up by learning German, and eventually studying Ukrainian in graduate school. I was able to put my Russian to use in two undergraduate research trips to Russian archives in Moscow where I began to work with primary source materials on the war. These experiences motivated me to seek a PhD in Russian/Eastern European history.

Q. How have students reacted when you lecture on this topic? Your scholarly articles discuss mass killings and torturing of women and children. Have any students complained about being exposed to potentially traumatic descriptions and images?

My experience teaching on these topics, first at Columbia on a teaching post-doc, and second, at UCLA since 2016, has been overwhelmingly positive. My courses on Eastern Europe in the 20th century and the Soviet experience are always full. I find students are curious and enthusiastic to learn about some of the many difficult moments of the 20th century. Most do not seem to come to the classroom with preconceived notions about the region, positive or negative, that I believe children of the Cold War, like me, had when we took these classes in the nineties or eighties. I also organize a team-taught course at UCLA each year on political violence and genocide for over two hundred first-year students called *Political Violence in the Modern*

World. My experiences running this large course have been no different over the past four years – UCLA students can and do work through sensitive material in a respectful and engaged manner.

Q. In past years you were able to travel to Russia and Ukraine and Russia and get access to records. Has that availability changed because of the war in Ukraine?

I was able to complete most of my dissertation and now manuscript research in Ukraine and Russia before the events of the 2014 Maidan Revolution, so I did not have any access issues at the time. Access to Soviet-era archival materials in Ukraine only improved after the revolution and arrival of the Poroshenko government thanks, somewhat ironically, to a suite of controversial laws known as the Decommunization Laws. While controversial in terms of memory politics, the laws simplified access to the archives, including former KGB archives, and this was a boon for historians like myself. The war in Ukraine has not shuttered the archives – I know some colleagues continue to go and I have been able to support seasoned research assistants who have been able to access materials — but the war has unquestionably hampered the ability of young Ukrainian scholars to complete their work. Russian missiles have also damaged some holdings, which is terrible for scholars.

Russia has been the inverse of Ukraine in recent years where archives have been more restricted, especially for foreigners. Accessing Russian archives will likely prove increasingly difficult, and though there have been recent efforts to create crowd-sourced digital repositories for scholars, nothing truly replaces the experience of working on-site. The future is concerning for Soviet studies and archival research in Russia and Ukraine, but ultimately what matters most is that the war ends, and Ukrainians can rebuild their lives and livelihoods. Scholarship is second to survival.

Q. Please tell us a little bit about the book you are working on, *Pathways to Perpetration: Violence and the Undoing of Multi-Ethnic Western Ukraine, 1941-1944*.

My book expands upon my earlier work on local perpetrators in multiethnic settings. It is a micro-level social and political history of the Nazi occupation of western Ukraine. It examines the motivations of those who participated in various arenas of violence during the war including pogroms, the Holocaust, ethnic cleansing, and paramilitary violence. Throughout, I demonstrate how the social identities and group formations that are typically assumed to have *caused* the violence were instead *caused by* it, and that political choices were less often anchored in pre-existing ideologies and beliefs but rather more dynamic and situational than previously argued.

My conclusions therefore challenge overriding nationalist and primordialist interpretations of the war and people's decisions in it. This integrative account of local perpetrators and decision-making is based on 10-plus years of research in Russia and Ukraine using sources in five

languages from eighteen archives, including post-war Soviet investigations, newly declassified KGB trials, German documents, and personal accounts. # # # #

Illustrations from Babi Yar entry in Wikipedia:

