

Ukraine's Museum of Anti-Terrorist Operation¹

Abstract

The ATO museum, which opened its doors to the public in May 2016, is indisputably something more than mere chronicles of an armed conflict in Ukraine's eastern borderlands. Well, like other military museums, it skilfully recreates a battlefield atmosphere. The museum celebrates the bravery of Ukrainian soldiers fighting against the enemy – the terrorists who are encroaching on their homeland. It also draws attention to the sufferings of civilians, who suddenly became victims of Putin's hybrid war. Yet, that is not all. Another aspect that comes to the fore (albeit it is not stated directly) is the museum's role in boosting Ukrainian national identity. The "anti-terrorist narrative", as the author puts it, may be a unique tool for unifying Ukrainian nation. Quite often, a common enemy overrides linguistic or cultural differences: it makes people feel united around the most basic of human needs – survival.

The location of the museum does not seem to have been chosen at random. On the one hand, Dnipro is just 100 kilometres away from the front line. On the other hand, this region did not always lean towards pro-Ukrainian political forces. But the four-year conflict has made Dnipro a bulwark of Ukrainian unity and independence.

Keywords: *Ukrainians, national identity, anti-terrorist narrative, hybrid war, common enemy, Anti-Terrorist Operation, Joint Forces Operation, ATO museum, Dnipro*

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What was thought as a way to remember the victims of a bloody conflict and point fingers at the enemy, might turn out to be a unique instrument of identity building in Ukraine.

How far can an elite go in its efforts, voluntary and involuntary, to foster a national identity in a given context? From mega-events [Menga, 2015, 2016; Militz, 2016] and massive public projects to national singing and tourism brochures [Pawłusz, Polese, 2017], a team of scholars, myself included, have been exploring a number of ways to boost national identity in post-Soviet countries [Isaacs, Polese, 2015, 2016; Perchoc, 2018; Polese et al., 2017, 2018].

We have looked at identity markers perpetuated by non-political actors [Datunashvili, 2017; Fabrykant 2018] — a new fashion or habit [Gavrilova, 2018; Pechurina, 2017] that goes viral nationally, or a social movement with which a large portion of the population identifies [Bulakh, 2017]. We have studied political measures conceived for other purposes [Kevlihan, Ó Beacháin, 2013, 2015] that end up affecting the identity of a considerable percentage of a national population.

But we had never considered nation building through terrorism — or, more specifically, through an anti-terrorist narrative.

Until a few weeks ago, at least.

Terrorism and National Identity

Credit goes to the organisers of the CAT-ference¹, who arranged a visit to the museum of Anti-Terrorist Operation² in Dnipropetrovsk, or Dnipro, as it has been the official name since May 2016. A joint initiative of veterans of the conflict and the regional administration, the museum was launched about two years ago.

I must admit, the use of the term “terrorism” to label what is happening nowadays in eastern Ukraine sounds rather awkward to me. However surprising, the museum does provide an excellent chance to reflect on the shades of meaning that words sometimes may assume and how definitions can be used.

It also offers an opportunity to reflect on how an anti-terrorism museum might play a role in the promotion of Ukrainian (civic) national identity in a region that has not always accepted the narratives constructed by the central administration in Kyiv.

In most of the government-controlled media, the people fighting against the Ukrainian state in the eastern region are termed “terrorists”; subsequently, actions against these groups are called “Anti-Terrorist Operation”. A museum devoted to how the state officially reacts to these events has to be called, by virtue of definitions, “the museum of Anti-Terrorist Operation”.

¹ CAT (Cities After Transition) is an extensive network of scholars primarily interested in urban issues regarding the post-socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. The name “CAT-ference” refers to several conferences organised by this network. The 7th International Urban Geographies of Post-Communist States Conference, mentioned by the author, took place in Kyiv and Dnipro on 26–29 September 2017.

² On 30 April 2018, the four-year Anti-Terrorist Operation was officially replaced by the Joint Forces Operation (JFO) in Donbas, marking Ukraine's shift to a more active defense.

The choice of this name, then, leaves nothing open to misinterpretation. Is there anyone who, at least nominally, supports terrorists? Endorsing anything related to terrorism is something socially unacceptable. Sympathising with insurgency, separatist aspirations or even Russian foreign policy might be a position that is hard to defend. However, terrorism is obviously the word you do not want to use to back up your cause if you seek some kind of support by people or states. It is a ghost that embodies the worst of the human condition: violence, murder, killings of innocent people.

The museum is strategically located a mere 100 kilometres (about 60 miles) from the front line of the conflict. Geographically, it can be regarded as boosting the commonalities between Kyiv and eastern Ukraine, since the exhibits cover operations in a large part of this region. Ideologically, it downplays ethnic identity in eastern Ukraine and puts Ukrainian citizens, regardless of their origins, in the same boat. They are all at risk of violence, or killing, by a common enemy — the terrorists. And those fighting them deserve a memorial in a museum that somehow celebrates the unity of Ukrainian people, integrity of the country's territory and the common values, or even history, that people from Transcarpathia to Donbas are supposed to share.

Is there anything that unites people, and peoples, better than common enemies?

The Faithful Wife and the Returning Husband

After walking through 19th century and Soviet buildings to reach the museum, one enters a small playground that has been transformed into a virtual battlefield. The visual effect is striking: road signs with bullet holes, blown-up cars and a few items evoking the idealistic approach of many Ukrainians to the conflict — like a small bunker where it reads (in Russian), “No need to fear” and outside (in Ukrainian), “If not us, then who [will defend our homeland]?”

The gloomy atmosphere stirs up a chilling feeling of insecurity. You are led to think: they are attacking us, and we have to defend ourselves from the enemy. But who is the enemy? The answer can be found in the name of the museum — the “terrorists”. But what terrorists? And what do they want?

Further into the museum, answers are provided. They want to annihilate Ukraine and Ukrainians — from the older to the younger generations, from their values to their desire for a peaceful and stable life.

Outside, surrounded by bunkers and vehicles, one can feel as if he/she is on the battlefield, with an eye on what soldiers do and risk. The inside part of the exhibition, on the contrary, seems designed to reflect the inner fears and sentiments of Ukrainian people. A reproduction of a hospital chair is shown, while an inscription illustrates the number of wounded and doctors needed to treat so many of them. Children's drawings express fear and hope, and a soldier-shaped piece of plastic or wood bears the writing, “Dad, come back alive”. Maps, names, quotes and artefacts retrieved from the front line decorate the walls to add a personal and more dramatic twist to the events.

Traditional values and stereotypes dominate here. A picture shows a woman waiting for her husband, who has heroically left his family to defend the homeland. As a good wife, she is waiting for him while taking care of the house, implic-

itly appreciating Ukrainian femininity, which combines beauty with the strength and patience to endure hardships.

A small space under the stairs is occupied by a bunker with a bed where a teddy bear gives an extra touch of drama, reminding the visitor that this is a conflict which affects entire families, including women and children.

The Construction of an Enemy

Visitors then enter a room with pictures of all the locals who have died during these years. The vision is heartbreaking, with portraits of 18- or 19-year-old boys, their faces just coming out of puberty, who have been killed in the conflict. Clothing and personal items add a personal touch to the room.

The message is implicit but clear: all these people have died defending their homeland against the enemy. Ukraine has never been immune from questions about regional identity — sometimes drifting into separatist ideas, but sometimes simply prompting some regions to challenge the official narrative on national identity put forward by the capital city. This particular narrative seems to counter any such inclinations and emphasises that Ukraine is undivided and fiercely standing up against the enemy.

That framing is completed by the audiovisual parts, which you can experience at the end, and which dispel all doubts. The enemy is the scariest one — the one that you could not see, the terrorists with unclear objectives but to kill and destroy. However, little hint has been provided to suggest where these terrorists are from and what they want.

The movie is projected onto the ceiling and all the white walls of an empty room in the midst of which you are standing. It starts with an overview of how peaceful and prosperous Ukraine and its people have been over the centuries — repulsing invasion attempts for the sake of an honest and humble life.

Then Russia, in particular Russian political actors, enter the picture. You see footage of political declarations on Russian TV by the likes of Putin and an extreme nationalist Zhirinovskiy, as well as scenes from the front. Violence, fear and sufferings of the common people are juxtaposed with political statements and evidence of Russian interests in the country.

Returning the Eastern Regions

Dnipro and its surroundings have thus become — through the museum and the region's role in the conflict — a legitimate part of Ukrainian territory. They contribute to the writing, or rewriting, of Ukraine's history. People from this area fight for Ukraine, die for Ukraine, and bravely and vigorously face a powerful enemy not just of Ukraine but also of its people, depriving it of its youth, men and freedom.

A common enemy is stronger than linguistic or cultural differences: it brings people together by making them feel united around the most basic of human needs — survival.

Much has been said about the politics behind all of this; much can be said and much blame can be tossed at any of the actors involved in the Ukrainian conflict. But this article is not the place for it. As a scholar of national identity I have been

fascinated by the amount of effort devoted to building a national narrative embedded in a museum.

Was it done on purpose or is it just a side effect? What were the intentions of the creators, and curators, of the museum? We will probably never find out. Nation building is performed through formal rules, laws, directives and a number of other instruments that are often not conceived, at least consciously, to influence national identity. Beyond the all-too-clear messages conveyed, that was possibly the most fascinating aspect of my visit.

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