



БОРЦЯМ ЗА ВОЛЮ
УКРАЇНИ
TO THOSE WHO DIED
FOR THE FREEDOM OF UKRAINE
MORTS POUR L'UKRAINE

СВІТЛА ПАМ'ЯТЬ
УСІМ ВОЛОНТЕРИМ І ДІТЯМ
І УМЕРЛИМ
ПІД ЧАС
ПОВІСЬ

PETER J THOMPSON / NATIONAL POST

The Russian Embassy has been tweeting images of what it labels “Nazi” monuments in Canada like this cenotaph at Oakville’s St. Volodymyr Ukrainian Cemetery.

MARIE-DANIELLE
SMITH

in Ottawa

FOLK HEROES OR WAR CRIMINALS?

RUSSIAN TAUNTS SPARK UKRAINIAN SELF-EXAMINATION

They were played up in October, and continued to trickle out through November: amid tweets about tennis, ambassadorial photo-ops and U.S. politics, Russia's embassy in Canada posted several comments about Canadian monuments to a Ukrainian independence leader and to soldiers from the Galician Division of Nazi Germany's Waffen-SS.

A military division formed in 1943, the Galician was made up of Ukrainians rallying against Soviet occupiers, whom Nazis were battling. Russian tweets about monuments to the Second World War fighters — “Nazi collaborators,” as the Russians describe them, or Ukrainian freedom fighters, as many in Canada's Ukrainian community prefer to think of them — have rekindled a long-standing debate over how Ukrainian-Canadians should commemorate their forebears.

Russia's Embassy to Canada is waging an online campaign even as it stokes conflict in eastern Ukraine and the Canadian government continues denouncing its 2014 annexation of Cri-

atic that Russians are the ones bringing it up.

“It would be refreshing and perhaps a form of self-healing ...” writes University of Alberta professor David Marples in a 2007 book on “heroes and villains” in Ukrainian national history, “if Ukrainians could offer a conception of their recent past that looked at all aspects of these events, recognizing in passing that heroes could be criminals.”

One of the monuments in question is at St. Volodymyr Cemetery in Oakville, Ont. It commemorates a major battle, the Brody, fought by the Ukrainian Galician Division of the German Waffen-SS against the Soviet Red Army, during which more than three-quarters of the Ukrainian soldiers perished.

The division was formed in 1943, after a majority of Ukrainian Jewish victims of the Holocaust had already

against them substantiated and “should not be indicted as a group.” This was, at least legally speaking, the end of the story.

Still, explained Dominique Arel, who holds the Chair of Ukrainian Studies at the University of Ottawa, individual members of the division had likely served in other German police units before joining the Galician Division, and any previous actions or crimes were not examined by the commission.

A bust of Roman Shukhevych, at the Ukrainian Youth Unity Complex in Edmonton, is the second monument being examined.

A spokesman for the complex, Paras Podilsky, rejected any notion that Shukhevych may have been involved in war crimes. “I have never heard in my life, and

ment. Arel said Shukhevych was involved in setting up another local militia known to have played a central role in the killings, however, and in 1942 he is said to have led a German police battalion in Belarus that was also implicated in civilian killings.

The same year, Shukhevych established the Ukrainian insurgency army, which acted as a “political arm” of the nationalist movement. Even though individual members of the nationalist movement were involved in the killing of Jews and a subsequent ethnic cleansing campaign against Polish people in Ukraine, the broader fight for Ukrainian independence — a fight waged not only against the Soviets but also against the Nazis, once it became clear they would not be allies — is

Shukhevych “symbolize this long and historical attempt by Ukrainians to resist, to defend themselves,” Arel said. “The Russian perspective is because there is a dark side, and the collaboration with the Germans, you reduce the entire insurgency to atrocities. And therefore the very idea that Ukrainians or any other group can resist Russian or Soviet occupation is delegitimized.”

What should Canadians think about the monuments, though?

“I think the question that Canadians really need to ask is, does the presence of these monuments in any way contribute to anti-Semitism, or to other forms of racism or bigotry in Canada today?” said Aidan Fishman, the interim director of the Jewish-Canadian organization B'nai Brith Canada's League for Human Rights.

The answer seems to be

cluding the embassy of trying to create divisions in Canada as part of a broader strategy to subvert Western democracies — or at least trying to discredit Ukraine as conflict continues in the eastern Donbass region, where, although Russia has denied any involvement, reports from the front lines say it is backing anti-government troops. Canada is helping to train government forces on the opposite side.

But still others point out that Canada's support seeks to help preserve Ukrainian democracy, and part of democracy means looking at the past with critical eyes. Arel alluded to Canada's own attempts to grapple with horrors inflicted upon Indigenous people in the past. “Canada should support similar efforts in Ukraine to engage in these difficult questions,” he said.

Some in the community, such as an organization called the Ukrainian Jewish Encounter, are already conducting efforts to reconcile with the past. It brings experts on Ukrainian and Jewish history together for roundtables with the ultimate goal of coming up with a combined narrative on which both scholarly communities agree.

“Unfortunately, the Ukrainian Canadian com-

and the Canadian government continues denouncing its 2014 annexation of Crimea. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has staunchly supported Ukraine.

Many are accusing Russia of intentionally sowing discord and attacking more than 1.3 million Ukrainian-Canadians by highlighting memorials that never intended to glorify Nazism — a distraction from Russians being accused of propping up anti-government fighters in eastern Ukraine.

“We know that our community is being attacked because of our and Canada’s support for Ukraine in the current war that Russia is waging there,” said Ihor Michalchyshyn, executive director and CEO of the Ukrainian Canadian Congress. “The Russian government is trying to stir up controversy and sort of obfuscate from the current situation that’s taking place in Europe.”

But others in the community suggest a hard look at the complex history of the Ukrainian independence movement, and its wartime entanglements, is long overdue — even if it’s problem-

in 1943, after a majority of Ukrainian Jewish victims of the Holocaust had already been targeted. The Waffen-SS was the military arm of the Nazi secret police that fought battles at the front lines but did not administer concentration camps.

Oleg Bezpitko, the manager of the cemetery, told the National Post the monument — to “whoever fought in this battle and never returned” — was probably erected sometime during the 1980s, before he himself immigrated to Canada. “Fighting on the German side doesn’t mean to be a Nazi, right,” he said.

“You have to understand, those were the people who were fighting communism.”

Bezpitko also confirmed that some buried at the cemetery were members of the division who had immigrated to Canada. Their presence here was part of a loud public debate that led to the Commission of Inquiry on War Criminals in Canada, named the Deschênes Commission after the justice who led it.

In 1986, it concluded that members of the Galician Division who immigrated to Canada hadn’t had charges

DOES THE PRESENCE OF THESE MONUMENTS CONTRIBUTE TO ANTI-SEMITISM?

I’ve known about Roman Shukhevych since I was little, about him being in any war crimes or anything we should be hiding,” he said.

Here’s what we know. Soviets took control of Western Ukraine in 1939, facilitated by a secret pact with the Germans. A far-right insurgency, the Organization for Ukrainian Nationalists, meanwhile sought German help to oust Soviets. In 1941, as Germany invaded the Soviet Union (and the secret pact dissolved), Shukhevych commanded one of two Ukrainian divisions attached to the German army, called the “Nachtigall.”

A pogrom that caused the deaths of thousands of Jews occurred in Lviv shortly after the battalion’s arrival in 1941. There’s no hard evidence proving its involve-

ment what the community remembers Shukhevych and other patriots for.

“Roman Shukhevych was the leader, very much respected even after the war, to continue this battle against the Soviet regime,” said Podiisky. “He’s completely seen as a hero, and respected to this day as a symbol of the fight for freedom.”

And it was a bloody fight. In taking full control over Western Ukraine around the end of the Second World War and onward, the Soviet Union killed more than 100,000 people and deported more than 200,000, Arel said. There was also the painful memory of the Holodomor, a man-made famine that killed between seven and 10 million people in that part of the Soviet Union in the 1930s.

Leaders such as

Brith Canada’s League for Human Rights.

The answer seems to be “no,” Fishman explained, since “the intent of these monuments is not to stir up hatred or to glorify crimes against Jews.” While B’nai Brith wouldn’t support any new such monuments, he said, it doesn’t see a need to demand for existing ones’ removal.

“I think that the communities that have established these monuments, so namely the Ukrainian-Canadian community, should take a critical look at these facts and should remind themselves that many of these people were engaged in collaboration with the Nazis,” said Fishman.

Michalchyshyn rejects any insinuation that Ukrainians collaborated with the Nazis. “I think that the premise of calling them Nazi collaborators is slanderous,” he said. “I think the real story here is about the Russian Embassy and what they’re trying to do to our community and how they’re trying to create an issue where there isn’t one.”

The Russian motivation merits scrutiny: some are ac-

“Unfortunately, the Ukrainian-Canadian organizations have not shown real readiness to discuss these issues,” Arel said. “On the whole, there’s a great deal of resistance.”

John-Paul Himka, another University of Alberta scholar and the uncle of Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland, reports being banned from most Ukrainian-Canadian publications for trying to bring research about Ukrainian involvement in the Holocaust to light.

“It’s about time that somebody paid attention to it,” he said by phone from Ukraine. “The fact is the Ukrainian government and the diaspora have been honouring Holocaust perpetrators and war criminals for a long time.”

The West should put greater emphasis on confronting the past, Himka added. “I do think they’re neglecting their role if they’re not putting pressure on Ukraine to do an honest confrontation with the events of the Second World War.”