



# The iron guards of Ukrainian nationalism

MAREK WOJNAR



Ukrainian nationalism of the interwar period was a political trend that shared some similarities with its **Romanian counterpart**. While the older generation of activists from the OUN (Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists) did not come close to the extremism of Romania's Iron Guard, the younger radicals found common ground with the movement.



The Ukrainian historian Ivan Lysiak-Rudnytsky strongly asserted that “the closest relatives to Ukrainian nationalism are to be found ... among similar types of political movements emerging in agricultural and economically backward nations of Eastern Europe. Good examples include the Croatian Ustaše, the Romanian Iron Guard, the Slovak Hlinka nationalists and the ONR (Polish National Radical Camp)”. The researcher's assessment does not seem to be arguable. Nevertheless, drawing comparisons between the OUN and other movements open up incredibly interesting research possibilities.

A good example of that can be the most recent book by Grzegorz Motyka, *Wołyń '43*, where the Polish academic sets the activity of Ukrainian nationalists against the policies pursued by the Croatian Ustaše. This interesting approach invites comparing the OUN (even if it was to be only a loose analysis) to the largest nationalist movement of the interwar period in Eastern Europe – namely, the Romanian Iron Guard.

## **Terrorists and politicians**

The name of the Iron Guard was initially given to the military wing of the nationalist Legion of the Archangel Michael – established in 1927 to be later used in

reference to the whole movement. The OUN in Ukraine was established in 1929 by merging the Ukrainian Military Organisation (a paramilitary movement) with several nationalist youth organisations in Poland and Czechoslovakia. Both groups played a historically noticeable role despite the fact that they significantly differed during the interwar period. According to Polish historian Roman Wysocki, on the eve of the Second World War the OUN had up to 9,000 members. This number is incomparable to the Iron Guard, which in 1937 had 272,000 people in its ranks. This variation, in terms of the total numbers involved, would suggest that there must have been quite a few differences between the two groups. The OUN was an illegal organisation in Poland while the Iron Guard operated under much more favourable circumstances. Aside from imposing periodical bans on its activity, the Romanian authorities were neither consistent nor determined in counteracting the nationalists.

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Ukraine's OUN had a two-level structure: it consisted of the *Provid* (the leadership scattered in various European countries) and the national executive (present only on the territory of the Second Polish Republic). The *Provid*'s members were the older generation of activists who had participated in the

events of the Ukrainian revolution in 1917-1920. The homeland executive (HE-OUN) had in its ranks people who were almost a generation younger and generally much more radical. The leader of the organisation, Yevhen Konovalets and his companions intended for the OUN to be a semi-legal structure engaging in ideological, educational and propaganda activities. Quite contrary to those intentions, younger activists, like Stepan Bandera, set the organisation on a path of sabotage and individual terror.

In August 1931 Tadeusz Hołowko, a Polish member of parliament, was killed in Truskavec by an OUN fighter. In 1934 in Warsaw, the Polish minister of the interior, Bronisław Pieracki, died in a similar fashion. Also in that year on the orders of Bandera, the HE-OUN killed Ivan Babiych, the director of a Ukrainian secondary school in Lviv, as punishment for turning in members of the OUN to the Polish authorities. While the younger generation of Ukrainian nationalists engaged in acts of terror, older activists did not shun political activity. A good example of that might be their involvement in lobbying for the international condemnation of the pacification of Ukrainians in Eastern Galicia.

A similar division of the "young" and the "old" did not exist in the Iron Guard. Corneliu Codreanu established the Legion (of the Archangel) as a new generation

movement after he had departed from the League of Christian National Defence, whose leader then was the 75- year-old Alexandru Cuza. As the movement grew, the Iron Guard gained some older members. The leadership remained in the hands of the revolutionary youth, who engaged in revolutionary and political matters. The best example is Codreanu himself, who in 1924, while testifying in court, used a revolver and shot dead Constantin Manciu, the chief police officer in the city of Iași. He was acquitted due to public pressure and five years later won a seat in the Romanian parliament.

That legitimisation did not stop the Iron Guard from engaging in terrorism, however. In November 1933 Ion Duca, the Romanian prime minister, was killed by Romanian nationalists. Three years later in a Bucharest hospital, an ex-member and a critic of the Iron Guard, Mihaiy Stelescu, was killed. Like the HE-OUN, the Iron Guard did not forgive those who were considered traitors. Yet, while Bandera received a death sentence for his activity (which was later replaced with lifelong imprisonment), Cordeanu managed to emerge unscathed by manoeuvring the obscure realities of interwar Romania. The December 1937 parliamentary elections took place and the Iron Guard received 16 per cent of the vote – 66 seats. The nationalists became the third largest political power in Romania.

### **Imperialistic revisionism**

Both organisations showed a great deal of sympathy towards the main proponents of revisionism in Europe – Germany and Italy – though their motivations were partially different. For Konovalets, Mussolini's dictatorship and the Third Reich were the main powers capable of undermining the existing order in Europe – one that had failed to support an independent Ukraine after the First World War. However, ideological affiliation with fascism did not play a large role for him. For Codreanu, in turn, Nazi Germany and fascist Italy appeared to be defenders of faith and Arian civilisation. His ideologically motivated sympathy towards the Third Reich and Mussolini's Italy were in many aspects similar to views held by the younger generation of Ukrainian nationalists. Bohdan Kordiuk (Bandera's predecessor as head of the HE-OUN) in 1934 stated that the Italian, German and Ukrainian nations are "the coryphaeuses of the new world order".

Both the OUN and League of the Archangel put forward imperialistic slogans. However, imperialism was not something of the utmost importance for the Iron Guard, as Romania, in the aftermath of the Great War, gained most of the land it had hoped. Nonetheless, some of its members would still put forward expansionist demands. On the map of legionary work (which illustrated the areas of

the organisation's involvement), Romania was outlined as stretching to the Tisza River. Ilie Radulescu, a supporter of the Iron Guard, dreamed of Romania ruled by an emperor and stretching as far as the Bug River, whereas Cordeanu himself suggested the need to fight for the Romanian nation to inhabit the territories from the Dniester River to the Pindus Mountains on the Greek-Albanian border. At the basis of this geopolitical fantasy was the fact that the Iron Guard considered the so-called Aromanian tribes, spread along the Balkan Peninsula, to be part of the Romanian nation (incidentally, there were several Aromenian activists in the ranks of the Guard).

When compared to the geopolitical demands of Ukrainian nationalists, even the above-presented vision seemed relatively moderate. The OUN activists were convinced that the lost Ukrainian revolution of 1917-1920 showed the ultimate failure of both the pro-Polish orientation, represented by the Ukrainian People's Republic, and agreements with the White movement and Bolsheviks made by politicians and high-ranking military staff from Galicia. They claimed that the only solution was to build a powerful state on their own, situated "on the border of the two worlds" that would comprise all ethnographically Ukrainian territories. The older generation of OUN activists envisioned Ukraine as a dominant power in Eastern Europe, while younger radicals, like Mykhaylo Kolodzinski, went even further in their vision. They called for the defeat of Russia and expand Ukraine's influence into Central Asia. These totally unrealistic visions saw Kazakhstan as a Ukrainian colony and Mongolia as a buffer state between Ukraine and Japan.

### **Facing history, death and God**

While the OUN's imperialism appeared noticeably larger than the one proposed by the Iron Guard, the latter definitely managed to outrun their Ukrainian counterpart in the grandiosity with which their founding myth was created. The OUN practically never looked for a testimony to Ukraine's historical mission in ancient times. The only activist who invoked events prior to Christ was Oleh Olzhytsch, the head of the Provid's section responsible for cultural matters. Olzhytsch believed that Ukrainians were descendants of the Tripoli culture that had appeared on the territory of Ukraine around 3000 BC. One of Olzhytsch's teachers was archaeologist Vadym Shcherbakivsky, who had influenced also on Yuri Lypa, a nationalist ideologue who was not connected with the OUN and who considered the Tripoli culture to be one of the greatest civilisations of the ancient world.

The Iron Guard, in turn, often referred to the concept of ancient history in order to give testimony to the historical mission of Romania. It was not by accident

that the bulletin of the party was entitled “The Land of Our Ancestors” (*Pământul Strămoșesc* in Romanian). The legionary movement ideologists invoked both Roman and Dacian historical epochs. Codreanu had a stone with the Tropaeum Traiani on it, built into the foundations of the Iron Guard’s headquarters (the so-called Green House, or Casa Verde in Romanian) which was to symbolise the direct link between the Roman legionaries and members of the legionary movement. The Dacian motif played a much bigger role, however. Petru Panaitescu, a historian affiliated with the Iron Guard, claimed that Romanians were a fully indigenous people belonging to the ancient Dacian race.

The OUN, on the other hand, sought to find testimony in their own claims back in the time of Kievan Rus’, which they saw as “the greatest and most powerful European empire” of its time. Ukrainian nationalists perceived it as the bulwark of European civilisation, defending it against the hordes of nomads flocking from the depths of Asia. In later centuries, this historical mission was

taken over by the Zaporozhian Cossacks. The Ukrainian nationalists emphasised the role they played in the victory at Khotyn and Vienna and thus saving Europe from the deluge of the Ottoman invaders. The Iron Guard’s vision of the past looked nearly identical: the only difference being that instead of Petro Konashevych-Sahaidachny fighting the Turks at the battle of Khotyn (and thus being the defender of Christianity), it was now ascribed to Mircea I of Wallachia or John Hunyadi, the voivode of Transylvania. In reality, however, these visions of the defenders of Europe that were created by the OUN and the Iron Guard ideologists were aimed at the future. Both Romanian and Ukrainian nationalists believed to have a special role to play in their mission to protect Europe against the Soviet Union, which was seen as the heir to the civilisation of the Tartar khans and Turkish sultans.

Another big difference between the two organisations can be observed in their attitude towards religion. Ukrainian nationalism is sometimes seen as secular in nature. Such a statement, however, is true only as far as the émigré part of the OUN is concerned. Among its domestic activists, the concept of militant Christianity can be found in some of the papers. These kinds of references, however, were much more prevalent in case of the Iron Guard. Codreanu’s movement considered their activity as a Christian revolution. The belief was that the suffering of the chosen ones would lead to the rebirth of a national community. For the Iron Guard it was the Archangel Michael, who symbolised their connection with the transcendent. Recalling the time he spent in prison in Văcărești in 1923, Codreanu wrote about

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his metaphysical experiences connected with the icon of the saint that was in the prison chapel: “I felt the bond with that icon with my whole heart and the Archangel seemed to be alive.” The icon became the holy relic for the organisation and Codreanu always carried a miniature with him.

While Archangel Michael symbolised the Iron Guard’s heavenly connection, their bond with Romanian soil was illustrated in how the activists would carry tiny bags filled with dirt from places where Romanian blood had been shed by their ancestors. As the organisation grew, historical heroes were gradually replaced by those who were more recently killed in action. That is how the cult of the martyrs was born. The funeral ceremony of Ion Moța and Vasile Marin, who fought alongside Francoists in the Spanish civil war and was killed in battle in 1937, was treated with the utmost significance. Even the passage of the train carrying their corpses gave rise to a demonstration. The ceremony itself was attended by tens of thousands of people. Moța and Marin were buried in a mausoleum built next to the Legion’s headquarters.

The cults of Vasyl Bilas and Dmytro Danylyshyn (who had been sentenced to death and executed by the Polish state in December of 1932) played a similar role in the case of the OUN. As Volodymyr Makar, a member of the organisation, later wrote: “their death was the final shock that allowed for the completion of the moral and spiritual awakening and then for the rebirth of literally the widest masses of people”. The OUN distributed leaflets with images of the dead. Their death was also commemorated in songs and poems. There were also some musical pieces dedicated to Moța and Marin, and during the time of the Legionary State a series of stamps were issued to honour them. However, after 1938 both personality cults in Romania and Ukraine were gradually replaced by the commemoration of the deaths of Konovalts (killed by the NKVD) and Codreanu (executed on the orders of King Carol II of Romania).

### **Nationalism and the others**

The greatest difference between the OUN and Iron Guard can be observed in regards to antisemitism. To say that “the Jewish problem” was of key importance to the Romanian nationalists would be an understatement. This topic took precedence over all other aspects of its ideology. Codreanu’s antisemitic obsession, which was well described in his autobiographical book *For My Legionaries* (in Romanian *Pentru Legionari*, 1936), can be directly compared to Nazi ideology. The leader of the Iron Guard compared the Jewish nation to “a tumour” and used such names as “the Jewish horde” and the many-headed Jewish hydra. Overestimating



threefold the number of Jewish people living on the territories of Romania, he sketched a vision of conspiracy aimed at creating a Jewish state that would stretch from the Baltic to the Black seas and encompass half of Romania. In the ideology of the Iron Guard, one could encounter such ideas as depriving Jews of their fundamental rights and even driving them into concentration camps. When writing about Romanian antisemitism, one has to bear in mind an important fact: over the course of the 19th century, large numbers of Jews immigrated to the territories of Romania (specifically to Moldavia), which made the situation in Romania quite distinct from that in Poland or Ukraine, and to some extent could account for the higher level of antisemitism among the general population in Romania.


Compared to the Iron Guard, the OUN might seem like an organisation showing a great deal of indifference towards the Jewish question. The lost fight for their own statehood in 1917-1920 made Ukrainian nationalism turn against Poland and Russia. It was only in the second half of the 1930s that such an idea as sending Jews to ghettos and forcing them to leave the country first appeared in the works of Volodymyr Martynets, the head of propaganda at the OUN. Mykhaylo Kolodzynski went even further: based on deeply racist premises, he altogether rejected the possibility of assimilation for the Jewish people. He claimed that the more that die during the Ukrainian nationalist uprising, the better it will be for Ukraine. In the same work, he called for all Poles to be expelled under threat of death from the territories that the OUN referred to as Western Ukrainian lands. These plans, which the young radicals affiliated with Bandera were very enthusiastic about, had a strong influence on the way Ukrainian nationalists acted towards Poles in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia in the years 1943-1944.

The 1930s in Europe were a time when authoritarian, nationalist and fascist movements were flourishing. The OUN and the Iron Guard are just two examples from a much broader panorama. Today, these two organisations are perceived quite differently. If Codreanu's movement is often referred to as fascist, the OUN is frequently regarded as a nationalist organisation – or even a national liberation movement. However, while the émigré OUN was quite considerably different from the Iron Guard, the younger generation of activists from the OUN – who in 1940 established their own faction with Stepan Bandera as its head – was much more similar.

The greatest difference between the OUN and the Iron Guard can be observed in their approach to **antisemitism**.

The following two quotes are a good illustration of this fact. In 1934, Yaroslav Stetsko, one of Bandera's closest associates, wrote: "a nationalist fighter does not

want people's death but the victory of the nationalist idea ... When the path to victory leads through blood, dead corpses and sacred knives, then that blood, corpses and swords are the means to the realisation of the idea." At around the same time, Emil Cioran, who later became a famous philosopher and at that time sympathised with the Iron Guard movement, declared: "Terror, crime, bestiality, duplicity are all mean-minded and immoral only in the state of decadence ... if, however, they are to help the nation in its development, they become virtues."

What is common to both quotations is that humanism is rejected in favour of nationalist egoism, which is not hesitant to turn to villainy. That is why the movements symbolised by Codreanu and Bandera deserve both critical remembering and comparisons with one another. 

*Translated by Agnieszka Rubka*

Marek Wojnar is a PhD student of Eastern European History at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków and a regular contributor for the Polish bimonthly *Nowa Europa Wschodnia*.