BOOK REVIEWS

Understanding Ukraine through historical and cultural narratives

Living the Independence Dream: Ukraine and Ukrainians in Contemporary Socio-Political Context (Social Equality and Justice). (2024). Lada Kolomiyets, Ed., Vernon Press, Pp. 366. ISBN 979-8881-901455, $89.00 (hardcover)

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The reviewed book, edited by Lada Kolomiyets, delivers a comprehensive, off-beat and thought-provoking illumination of Ukraine as a living dream. A prolific scholar, skilful lecturer, and gifted translator, Professor Kolomiyets successfully organised diverse and, at first sight, unconnected works into three sections: *Historical Narratives, Language, and Cultural Policy; Philosophy, Popular Culture, Literature*, and *Memoirs and Reflections*. In the course of reading, however, it becomes obvious that twelve chapters collectively articulate the enduring nature of the centuries-long opposition between Ukraine and Russia. Each chapter, therefore, seems directly or indirectly linked to Ukraine's resistance to Russian claims on its sovereignty.

In the opening chapter, Antonina Berezovenko of the Igor Sikorski Polytechnic Institute in Kyiv contends that the Russian-Ukrainian war has transformed Ukrainian national identity by accelerating decolonisation, strengthening civic solidarity, and reshaping collective memory through lived experience and public discourse. Rather than treating identity as fixed or solely ethnic, Berezovenko conceptualises it as a dynamic process shaped by Russian aggression and collective Ukrainian resistance. Since 2014, and especially

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following the full-scale invasion in 2022, Russian actions have become a defining factor in the development of contemporary Ukrainian identity. The chapter also addresses Ukraine's ongoing decolonisation from Russian imperial and Soviet legacies, emphasising the importance of reclaiming Ukrainian history, language, culture, and historical memory to overcome colonial domination and establish an independent national narrative. The chapter titled *Making the Future – Remaking the Past: Historical Narrative in State-Building Processes in Today's Ukraine*, reflects the idea of collective memory reconstruction and identity evolution that remain one of the Ukrainians' most important pillars for post-war recovery, democratic consolidation, and long-term national development.

Chapter 2, *Holodomor—Genocide, War Crimes & Crimes Against Humanity*, authored by Bohdan Futey, the Senior Judge of the US Court of Federal Claims in Washington, DC, explores the evolution of international law on genocide. Futey argues that both the Holodomor of 1932–1933 and Russia's aggression against Ukraine since 2014, culminating in the full-scale invasion of 2022, satisfy the legal criteria for genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. The chapter asserts that accountability for these crimes is essential for Ukraine and for the preservation of the international legal order. The Senior Judge traces here the development of international humanitarian law from the Nuremberg Trials through the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide and subsequent conventions. He contends that the Holodomor and Russia's recent actions constitute a broader pattern of crimes against the Ukrainian nation. Accordingly, Futey emphasises that holding Russia legally accountable is crucial for safeguarding international law, protecting human dignity, and maintaining global security.

In his chapter 3, *The Influence of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church on Shaping Ukrainian National Identity*, Domagoj Krpan of the University of Rijeka, Croatia, argues that the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC) played a pivotal role in the emergence, preservation, and consolidation of Ukrainian national identity, particularly in Western Ukraine (Galicia) during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The chapter maintains that, while much of Ukraine was subject to prolonged political and cultural domination by the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union, Galicia developed under Habsburg rule, enabling the Greek Catholic Church to become a significant institution for fostering a distinct Ukrainian national consciousness. The Greek Catholic clergy, through their longstanding commitment, served as spiritual leaders who preserved language, culture, education, and religious autonomy. These efforts established the UGCC as one of the key architects of modern Ukrainian national identity and a lasting contributor to Ukraine's civic and political development.

In her chapter 4, *Between 'Ideal' and 'Living' Language: Ideologies of the Ukrainian Language Revival in Independent Ukraine*, Natalia Kudriavtseva from

Kryvyi Rih State Pedagogical University, Ukraine, traces how language ideologies have shaped the Ukrainian language's revival since 1991. Rather than seeing Ukrainian as conventionally endangered, Kudriavtseva attributes its vulnerability to Russification and political repression under imperial and Soviet rule. The chapter focuses on shifting public attitudes and their impact on language revitalisation, rather than structural language changes. Kudriavtseva identifies two main ideological phases: the early post-independence emphasis on Ukrainian as a national symbol, and a later, more inclusive approach. The initial focus on linguistic purity and ideal speakers hindered wider adoption, especially among Russian-speaking Ukrainians, by setting high standards and discouraging everyday use. After the Orange Revolution (2004) and Euromaidan (2013-2014), a pragmatic ideology took hold, valuing Ukrainian as a tool for communication over a symbol of ethnic identity. This shift encouraged acceptance of colloquial forms, multilingualism, and hybrids like *surzhyk*, fostering greater participation and confidence in the language's future. The chapter concludes that Ukrainian language revitalisation has evolved from safeguarding an idealised standard to embracing a flexible, living language, reflecting growing confidence in Ukraine's independence and the secure status of Ukrainian as its state language. Ukrainians have increasingly understood the profound influence of their language, as it now stands as "a defining boundary" (Denysevych & Snikhovska, 2025) of national identity and statehood.

Chapter 5, *Thirty Years of Political Orders in Ukraine: Constructing a Nation of Decentralized Communities,* by Ostap Kushnir from the University of Portsmouth, UK, argues that rather than viewing Ukraine strictly as a culturally homogeneous nation-state, it can be understood as a community of diverse, decentralised political and civic communities whose common identity has been shaped by geography, history, and especially the legacy of Cossack self-governance. Cossack traditions remain the foundation of Ukrainian political culture. Thus, the response to Russian aggression also reflects Cossack traditions. Following Russia's invasion in 2014 and especially after the full-scale invasion in 2022, Ukrainians demonstrated spontaneous volunteer mobilisation, local initiative, and inclusive civic identity. Ukraine's future depends on combining democracy with effective state institutions. Kushnir concludes that Ukraine should neither copy Western institutions mechanically nor return to centralised authoritarian models. The chapter argues that Ukraine's political development is best explained not through ethnic or linguistic divisions but through its historical experience as a frontier society. Its geography fostered decentralised communities, while the legacy of the Cossacks established enduring traditions of self-organisation, civic participation, and local autonomy. These traditions continue to shape Ukraine's revolutions, decentralisation reforms, and resistance to Russian aggression, making democratic decentralisation the defining feature of modern Ukrainian statehood.

Olga Gomilko from the Hryhorii Skovoroda Institute of Philosophy of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine opens Part 2 of the book with her chapter 6, *Happiness as a Value or Why are Ukrainians (Un)happy?* She examines happiness through the lens of postcolonial theory, arguing that for Ukrainians, happiness is inseparable from freedom. The chapter's central paradox is that although Ukrainians ranked among the least happy nations before 2022, the full-scale Russian invasion strengthened their sense of freedom and national dignity, making them psychologically more optimistic despite the devastating human toll of war. Gomilko argues that Ukrainian happiness cannot be understood through conventional measures of well-being alone. Before 2022, postcolonial dependence, distrust, and Russian neo-colonial influence suppressed Ukrainians' sense of freedom and produced widespread unhappiness. The full-scale invasion fundamentally altered this condition by making freedom the supreme civic value. Although the war brought immense loss and suffering, it also accelerated decolonisation, strengthened democratic identity, and restored a sense of purpose. In this account, happiness emerges not from prosperity but from the virtuous defence of freedom, echoing Aristotle's conception of *eudaimonia* while situating it within Ukraine's contemporary historical experience.

Lada Kolomiyets, the editor of the book, also proposes a fundamental chapter 7, *A People's Cyber War: Ukraine's Digital Folklore and Popular Mobilisation*, where she explores how Ukrainians transformed digital folklore, humour, poetry, memes, and online creativity into powerful instruments of civic resistance before and after Russia's full-scale invasion of February 2022. The central argument is that cyberspace became an essential battlefield where ordinary citizens challenged Russian propaganda, recorded lived experiences of war, strengthened national identity, and mobilised society. Kolomiyets argues that Russia's war against Ukraine is simultaneously a military, informational, linguistic, and cultural conflict. Russian propaganda attempted to reshape reality through manipulative language "Newspeak", while Ukrainians responded with an extraordinary wave of digital folklore – memes, jokes, poetry, neologisms, visual art, and online storytelling. These forms of grassroots creativity that could be treated in terms of 'humor activism' (Klumbytė & Yeremieieva, 2026) strengthened civic solidarity, countered disinformation, documented wartime experience, and helped construct a distinct postcolonial Ukrainian identity. In this sense, digital culture became a people's cyber war, in which millions of ordinary citizens participated alongside soldiers in defending Ukraine's sovereignty and historical truth. In this regard, counter-propaganda to Russian narratives should rely on creativity rather than censorship. In other words, instead of merely rejecting them, Ukrainians creatively deconstructed these narratives through parody, irony, and satire. The chapter also presents

numerous bright examples where propaganda slogans were transformed into jokes, caricatures, and linguistic inventions that revealed their internal contradictions while maintaining public morale.

Chapter 8, *To Reach Paradise, Maturing in Purgatory Is Necessary*, by Larissa Zaleska Onyshkevych from Princeton Research Forum, is focused on two contemporary Ukrainian literary works reinterpreting Dante's *Divine Comedy* to explore Ukraine's historical journey from Soviet oppression toward national renewal. The central argument is that both individuals and nations must confront traumatic memories, reclaim their cultural identity, and mature spiritually before achieving freedom, self-realisation, and a metaphorical "Paradise." Zaleska Onyshkevych argues that Dante's journey from Hell through Purgatory to Paradise provides a powerful metaphor for Ukraine's historical development. Through analyses of Valerii Shevchuk's *The End of the Century* and Sofiia Maidanska's *In Te Speravi*, the chapter demonstrates that Soviet totalitarianism inflicted profound psychological and cultural wounds. Still, these can be overcome through truthful remembrance, reconciliation on a nation-wide scale, family and community solidarity, and the recovery of Ukraine's historical and cultural heritage. Individual self-discovery and national independence are therefore inseparable: only by confronting the past, preserving authentic memory, and embracing enduring cultural values can Ukraine mature into a free and spiritually renewed nation.

A Participating Witness to Modern Ukraine is chapter 9 of the third part of the book. Historian Martha Bohachevsky Chomiak offers an autobiographical reflection, tracing her personal and professional engagement with Ukraine from the late 1950s through the post-independence era. Instead of a conventional historical account, this chapter reveals how personal relationships, cultural exchanges, academic cooperation, and diaspora involvement helped foster Ukraine’s emergence on the international stage. The core argument asserts that connections between Ukrainians inside and outside the Soviet Union sustained Ukrainian identity despite deep divisions and laid the groundwork for independence. Bohachevsky Chomiak argues that Ukraine’s modern history cannot be understood solely through diplomacy or state politics, but must be seen through the web of personal ties spanning the Iron Curtain. Her memoir demonstrates how cultural exchange, academic collaboration including the US Fulbright Program, friendship, and diaspora networks slowly overcame Cold War barriers. These bonds preserved Ukrainian identity under Soviet rule and contributed to building Ukraine’s educational and democratic institutions. The chapter also highlights the Sixtiers generation of writers Vitaly Korotich, Ivan Drach, Ivan Dziuba, Lina Kostenko, and others who, despite censorship, promoted Ukrainian culture and maintained international contacts. Their outreach introduced Ukraine to Western audiences before independence.

Indeed, Bohachevsky Chomiak emerges as both an observer and a participant in Ukraine's re-emergence as an independent European nation.

Chapter 10, *The Way We Were: The Semiotics of a Ukrainian Diaspora Experience*, by Myroslava Tomorug Znayenko from Rutgers University, offers an autobiographical account of forging Ukrainian and American identities through war, displacement, education, and scholarship. Rather than a theoretical study, Znayenko's chapter uses her life as a case study, revealing how family heritage, memory, and intellectual pursuit helped displaced Ukrainians preserve identity and contribute to new societies. Her story, deeply personal yet representative, mirrors the collective experience of Ukrainian émigrés committed to sustaining Ukrainian identity and supporting Ukraine's independence. Znayenko contends that the Ukrainian diaspora is not simply a community in exile but an active historical force that maintained Ukrainian identity through decades of statelessness and Soviet rule. Her account demonstrates how family values, multilingualism, wartime experience, academic work, and civic engagement nurtured both national consciousness and democratic ideals. Eventually, the chapter presents diaspora identity as a dynamic blend of loyalty to Ukraine and engagement in American civic and intellectual life, proving that heritage can be preserved alongside full integration into a new homeland.

In his chapter 11, *War and the Historian: Subjective Notes*, Yuri Shapoval from the Kuras Institute of Political and Ethnonational Studies, National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, examines the current war in Ukraine through the concept of "mental war," aiming to establish a social basis for its paradigm and to analyse the instrumentalisation of "post-truth." In the information society, the most valuable resource is the population, which is systematically influenced by propaganda – a key pillar of modern Russian imperialism. Consequently, Russia invests significant financial resources in supporting state-controlled mass media as a technotronic means of disseminating expansionist and great-power ideologies, narratives, and theses. This chapter seeks to explore the impact of contemporary events on a historian directly experiencing the critical moment of full-scale war. Such an experience is distinctive, as it encompasses both professional analysis of current events and the subjective perceptions of an individual immersed in their unfolding. The work investigates how the present war influences understandings of the past, particularly the Second World War, and aims to identify and analyse the essential characteristics of Russia as a state entity. It presents and examines features that constitute the neo-imperial essence of the Russian Federation, both historically and in the present.

The book concludes with chapter 12, *Ukrainians and the World*, as a photo gallery compiled and commented on by Antonina Berezovenko. She notes, "the idea of Ukrainians will not be complete if we do not talk about the part of

Ukrainians that lives outside Ukraine" (p. 316). This photo gallery seeks to deepen understanding of Ukrainians in emigration by presenting a collage of images capturing moments from the real lives of Ukrainians abroad. It illustrates how individual life trajectories are intertwined with the socio-political dynamics of countries that were once foreign to them or their ancestors.

In sum, the book refuses to settle for mere observation, instead offering a vibrant kaleidoscope of perspectives on Ukraine's life and ongoing transformation. With intellectual daring and creative flair, the volume curated by Lada Kolomiyets invites readers to witness Ukraine not as a static subject, but as a living, dreaming nation in the act of becoming. Each chapter here captivates, challenges, and enlightens. The result is a vivid story that honours both the pain and the resilience of Ukraine, illuminating its unbroken spirit amid adversity. By bringing together contributions from leading Ukrainian, North American, and European scholars, Lada Kolomiyets profoundly internalises vital and timely contributions to Ukrainian and East Slavonic Studies. Although Ukraine has drawn more attention today through the sad chapter in her history, the book rediscovers Ukraine and its noble people for a global audience, broadening and deepening the scope of their knowledge about the country of dignified history, old democracy, Christian values, beautiful language, multinational culture, rich philosophy, and courageous leaders.

This review, like the book itself, ultimately serves as an invitation: look deeper, think critically, and interact in 'co-constructing' (Haugh, 2011) the meaning in Ukraine's versatile story, a story still being written.

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