

Serhy Yekelchuk

Writing the Nation

The Ukrainian Historical Profession in Independent
Ukraine and the Diaspora

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To the memory of my history professors
Olha Lytvyn and Vitaly Sarbei

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Acknowledgments

I began putting this book together in the fall of 2021. However, beginning in December 2021 media interest in Ukraine and the possibility—and, since 24 February 2022, the reality—of Russia’s massive invasion, forced me to put these plans aside, because giving talks and interviews became more important for me and for Ukraine. When I finally returned to the manuscript in the summer and early fall of 2022, we were all living in a different world. In these new circumstances, the topic of Ukraine’s history became more, not less, important than before the start of the Russian invasion. Completing this book became just as urgent a task as giving interviews, and this task was finally accomplished before the yellow leaves started coming down the trees on the beautiful island in the Pacific Ocean that I call home—in addition to Kyiv, which where my heart is.

I am grateful to Andreas Umland and the *ibidem*-Verlag team for welcoming this book project and being patient when the events of the war distracted me from working on the manuscript. I owe an apology to Kathy Bedorf for all those changing submission deadlines I kept sending her way. Publishing this monograph in *ibidem*’s “Ukrainian Voices” series has a special meaning to me because it brought me into the company of Ukrainian intellectuals and Western scholars working on Ukraine. This is precisely the kind of transnational academic community that I describe in my book.

I would like to thank the Ukrainian muralist Roman Bonchuk, the creator of the largest painting ever made in Ukraine—*The Chronicle of Ukraine* (2007)—for allowing me to reproduce a fragment of this work on the cover of this book. Milan Zec started working as a research assistant on this project when he was my MA student, and he helped complete it in the first year of his PhD. I greatly appreciate his assistance, especially with compiling the bibliography. Marta D. Olynyk expertly copy-edited the text and translated two chapters based on articles that were originally published in Ukrainian. Many colleagues in my two departments at the Uni-

versity of Victoria supported me in myriad ways during that difficult year for Ukraine and for me personally. Olga and Lesyk did not mind seeing my laptop on the kitchen table, and my parents in Kyiv taught me courage by remaining in the besieged city when the Russian army was closing in on it.

I am grateful to the journal editors, who gave me permission to include in this book, in a significantly revised form, six articles originally published in these journals:

- “The Location of Nation: Postcolonial Perspectives on Ukrainian Historical Debates,” *Australian Slavonic and East European Studies* 11, no. 2 (1997): 161–84.
- “Writing the History of Ukrainian Culture before, under, and after Communism,” *Australian Slavonic and East European Studies* 20, nos. 1–2 (2006): 15–37.
- “Bridging the Past and the Future: Ukrainian History Writing Since Independence,” *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 53, nos. 2–4 (2011): 45–62.
- “A Long Goodbye: The Legacy of Soviet Marxism in Post-Communist Ukrainian Historiography,” *Ab Imperio*, no. 4 (2012): 401–16.
- “Studying the Blueprint for a Nation: Canadian Historiography of Modern Ukraine,” *East-West: Journal of Ukrainian Studies* 5, no. 1 (2018): 115–37.
- “Tvorchyi metod Ivana Lysiaka-Rudnytskoho: Kontseptualni ta metodolohichni vymiry,” *Ukrainska biohrafistyka*, no. 18 (2019): 54–66.
- “Prostorova istoriia: Ukrainska perspektyva,” *Narodna tvorchist ta etnolohiia*, no. 5 (2018): 59–65.

Chapters 1, 6, and 10, as well as the Introduction and Conclusion, are not based on any prior publications and appear here for the first time.

This book is dedicated to the memory of two Ukrainian historians who put me on the path to joining this profession. From 1986 to 1989 Associate Professor Olha Lytvyn of the Taras Shevchenko University of Kyiv served as the supervisor of my annual *kursovi* papers as well as my graduate thesis. She helped me place my first

published articles and persuaded the director of the Institute of History at the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences to give me a chance at becoming a researcher. With every passing year I appreciate more and more the things she taught me about the profession, but also about life. At the Institute of History (soon to be renamed the Institute of Ukrainian History), Professor Vitaly Sarbei became my supervisor and the source of wisdom on all kinds of issues, academic and otherwise. I still do not understand how he managed to write so many texts while supervising a busy research department with numerous graduate students, but his somewhat old-fashioned manners went hand-in-hand with his personal attention to the needs of every *aspirant* (graduate student) working under him.

Introduction

Subversive Histories

In late March 2022, just a month into Russia's full-scale invasion, the Ukrainian media published the first reports about the purge of public and school libraries in the Russian-occupied territories. The Russian military police and administrators installed by the occupiers were going through the library shelves, culling textbooks of Ukrainian history and literature, as well as any academic and popular publications devoted to the history of Ukrainian resistance to the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. For the purgers' convenience, a list of anti-Russian Ukrainian historical figures was apparently compiled, with any book mentioning them in a positive light slated for removal. It included the Cossack hetman Ivan Mazepa, who rebelled against the empire in 1708–9; Symon Petliura, the most prominent figure of the Ukrainian Revolution of 1917–20; and Stepan Bandera and Roman Shukhevych, the radical nationalist leaders of World War II and the immediate postwar period. Interestingly, the list also featured Ukrainian patriots from the late Soviet period: the great Ukrainian dissident poet Vasyl Stus, who died in the Soviet Gulag in 1985, and the former dissident Viacheslav Chornovil, who as a political figure during the late 1980s and early 1990s contributed greatly to spreading the idea of an independent Ukrainian state. The official Russian explanation for the removal of all these books was that they represented “extremist” literature.¹

1 Violetta Orlova, “Rosiiany pochaly borotbu z ukrainskymy knyzhkamy na okupovanykh terytoriiakh,” UNIAN, 24 March 2022, <https://www.unian.ua/war/viyna-v-ukrajini-rosiyani-na-okupovanih-teritoriyah-nishchat-ukrajinski-knizhki-novini-vtorgnennya-rosiji-v-ukrajinu-11758072.html>; Denys Karlovsky, “Okupanty na zakhoplenykh terytoriiakh boriutsia z pidruchnykamy istorii, Stusom i Banderoiu,” *Ukrainska Pravda*, 24 March 2022, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2022/03/24/7334252/>; Diana Krechetova, “Okupanty vyluchaiut z bibliotek ukrainski knyzhky, shchob znyshchyty ikh,” *Ukrainska Pravda*, 25 May 2022, <https://life.pravda.com.ua/culture/2022/05/25/248802/>.

While most of the books were apparently destroyed, the occupiers also sent some of them to Moscow, where some fifty Russian historians and educators analyzed them for the presence of anti-Russian interpretations. One outcome of this process was a televised press conference on the topic “Ukrainian Textbooks as an Element in the Propaganda of Hatred.” Held at the Russian Federation’s Ministry of Education and co-sponsored by the ruling United Russia party, the event featured Russian officials and scholars showing some captured textbooks to the public and quoting some particularly “anti-Russian” and “extremist” passages. Among other things, the participants argued that Western historians of Ukraine had laid the foundations of a separatist, anti-Russian, Ukrainian historical narrative by justifying the existence of the “artificial” Ukrainian people. As proof of that, during the press conference, Aleksei Lubkov, president of the Moscow State Pedagogical University, showed the Russian translation of my history of Ukraine, which came out in Kyiv in 2010.²

Of course, it is difficult to imagine a single book, originally published in English in 2007 by Oxford University Press—even if taken together with the recent works produced by all the historians of Ukraine teaching in the West—furnishing the basis for an anti-Russian line in modern Ukrainian textbooks.³ Clearly, the Ukrainian textbook authors were working within a much older and wider tradition going back to the great Ukrainian historian Mykhailo Hrushevsky (1866–1934), if not to his nineteenth-century predecessors. But such propagandistic aggrandizement of Western historians’ role in “separating” Ukraine from Russia actually highlighted three important themes that will be developed in this book. First, the Ukrainian diaspora played a major role in the formation of a

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- 2 “Press-konferentsiia Edinoi Rossii i Minprosveshcheniia Rossii ob ekspertize ukrainskikh uchebnikov,” YouTube, 31 March 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g5GnejdJiL0>. See also “Materialy k press-konferentsii ‘Ukrainskie uchebniki kak instrument propagandy nenavisti,’” Edinaia Rossiia, 30 March 2022, <https://er.ru/pages/analiz>.
 - 3 Sergei Ekelchik [Serhy Yekelchyk], *Istoriia Ukrainy: Stanovlenie sovremennoi natsii*, trans. N. Klimchuk and E. Leenson (Kyiv: K. I. S., 2010); the original publication in English is Serhy Yekelchyk, *Ukraine: Birth of A Modern Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

modern Ukrainian historical narrative, both by serving as keeper of forbidden historical concepts and by introducing modern Western methodologies into Ukrainian scholarship. Second, the Ukrainian historical profession of today is increasingly global. The once-important division between Soviet Ukrainian and émigré scholars has been erased, with scholars from Ukraine actively participating in international projects, winning fellowships and positions in the West, and taking part as equals in Western academic debates. Third, and perhaps most important, this now-globalized Ukrainian historical scholarship threatens Russian imperial narratives just as much as did the works of Hrushevsky and other Ukrainian historians of the early twentieth century.⁴

The latter point needs some elaboration. The list of Ukrainian historical personalities used for purging libraries did indeed include figures whom the authorities of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union had considered enemies or “traitors.” But this only goes to show that Putin’s war on Ukrainian history follows the familiar imperial models from tsarist and Soviet times. In other words, the clash of memories was not just about present-day independent Ukraine presenting a challenge to Putin’s Russia, but about any version of Ukrainian history in which the Ukrainian people are endowed with agency undermining any notion of Russia as an empire.

This acknowledgement brings into the discussion of Ukrainian historiography the important concept of decolonization. It also allows historians in Ukraine to benefit from the insight into the cultural logic of imperial rule and post-imperial identity work that the discipline of Postcolonial Studies has generated over the past several decades. Ukrainian literary scholars both in Ukraine and abroad – most notably, Tamara Hundorova, Marko Pavlyshyn, and

4 On Hrushevsky, see Frank E. Sysyn, “Introduction to the *History of Ukraine-Rus’*,” in Mykhailo Hrushevsky, *History of Ukraine-Rus’*, Volume 1: *From Prehistory to the Eleventh Century*, trans. Marta Skorupsky, ed. Andrzej Poppe and Frank E. Sysyn with the assistance of Uliana M. Pasicznyk (Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 1997), xxii–xlii; Serhii Plokhyy, *Unmaking Imperial Russia: Mykhailo Hrushevsky and the Writing of Ukrainian History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).

Myroslav Shkandrij—have been employing the analytical instruments of Postcolonial Studies with great success since the early 1990s. However, Ukrainian historians have been more reluctant to embrace them, in large measure because they did not see Ukraine as a classic colony, an exploited and often racially different possession of a European metropole.⁵

This is bound to change as a result of the Russian Federation's massive invasion in 2022 aimed at "recovering" all of Ukraine for what can only be called a new Russian empire. The American-based historian of Russia, Ilya Gerasimov, has made a compelling case that the Revolution of Dignity as well as the unsuccessful revolt in Belarus in 2020 can be interpreted as postcolonial revolutions.⁶ Moreover, Timothy Snyder has defined the 2022 invasion as Russia's "colonial war," while other social scientists have written about the war's "postcolonial" dimension.⁷

The "decommunization" policies introduced in Ukraine in 2015 had some recognizable features of decolonization. Indeed, in a 2016 interview in the Ukrainian online magazine *Korydor*, I singled out decolonization as the true nature of this process, while warning against a simplistic understanding of colonialism that could excuse the past Ukrainian elites from responsibility for what the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union did in Ukraine.⁸ In 2019

5 See, e.g., Stephen Velychenko, "Post-Colonialism and Ukrainian History," *Ab Imperio*, no. 1 (2004): 391–404.

6 See Ilya Gerasimov, "Ukraine 2014: The First Postcolonial Revolution: Introduction to the Forum," *Ab Imperio*, no. 3 (2014): 22–44; Ilya Gerasimov and Marina Mogilner, "Deconstructing Integration: Ukraine's Postcolonial Subjectivity," *Slavic Review* 74, no. 4 (Winter 2015): 715–22; Ilya Gerasimov, "The Belarusian Postcolonial Revolution: Field Reports," *Ab Imperio*, no. 3 (2020): 259–72.

7 Timothy Snyder, "The War in Ukraine Is a Colonial War," *The New Yorker*, 28 April 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/essay/the-war-in-ukraine-is-a-colonial-war-colonial-war>; Maria Mälksoo, "The Postcolonial Moment in Russia's War against Ukraine," *Journal of Genocide Research*, published online 11 May 2022, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14623528.2022.2074947>.

8 Serhii Iekelchuk [Serhy Yekelchuk], "Iakshcho kolonialnyi, znachyt my ne byly vidpovidalni za mynule," *Korydor*, 19 October 2016, <http://www.korydor.in.ua/ua/stories/sergij-yekelchuk-pamjat-reprezentacija-kultura.html>.

Barbara Törnquist-Plewa and Yuliya Yurchuk argued for considering Ukrainian memory politics from a postcolonial perspective.⁹ The last step is to extend this framework's application from studies of historical memory to wider research on Ukrainian history and historiography. This is the approach used in this book.

Western scholars working on Ukrainian historiography have generally focused on the challenges caused by the restoration of the "national paradigm" as the dominant narrative of national history at a time when history writing in the West was undermining grand narratives by focusing on previously marginalized groups and experiences. Transnational and regional approaches have been recommended instead as being more modern and resistant to mythologizing.¹⁰ Yet, the notion of decolonization allows re-conceptualizing the nationalizing reading of history as textual resistance to the Russian imperial narrative. Because Ukrainian history cannot be constructed as a continuous history of state development, it incorporates by definition stories that are typical of decolonizing narratives: peasants' lives and struggles, the suppression of indigenous culture, and the ambiguous role of the national intelligentsia in reshaping the national culture for the empire's purposes.

Theoretical models from Postcolonial Studies allow for a better understanding of such Ukrainian phenomena as the Soviet methods used in the creation of new historical concepts and the obsession with the exact historical positioning of Ukraine between East and West. The more recent emphasis in historical narratives on Ukraine's being a legitimate part of Europe is also a marker of the postcolonial condition, but an unusual one, which propels Postcolonial Studies in a new direction. Other principal features of post-

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- 9 Barbara Törnquist-Plewa and Yuliya Yurchuk, "Memory Politics in Contemporary Ukraine: Reflections from the Postcolonial Perspective," *Memory Studies* 12, no. 6 (December 2019): 699–720.
- 10 See, e.g., Georgiy [Heorhii] Kasianov and Philipp Ther, eds., *A Laboratory of Transnational History: Ukraine and Recent Ukrainian Historiography* (Budapest: SEU Press, 2009); Andrei Portnov, *Uprazhneniia s istoriei po-ukrainski* (Moscow: OGI-Polit.ru-Memorial, 2010); Serhii Plokhyy, ed., *The Future of the Past: New Perspectives on Ukrainian History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, 2017); Heorhii Kasianov, *Past Continuous: Istorychna polityka 1980-kh–2000-kh: Ukraina ta susidy* (Kyiv: Laurus and Antropos-Logos-Film, 2018).

Soviet Ukrainian historiography would also be recognizable to students of decolonization elsewhere. This is true of the “recovery” of national historical models preserved in the diaspora and the acquisition of modern historical methodology from the West, also with the diaspora’s assistance. It is also true to say that Ukrainian history writing and memory politics are still locked in a debate with Russian ones – both in the fields preferred by the Putin administration, such as World War II, and in the ones inconvenient for the former imperial master, such as the fall of the Russian Empire in 1917 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Recognizing that their work is part of the decolonization process would allow the historians of Ukraine in that country and abroad to deconstruct imperial mythologies more effectively and make new Ukrainian history different from the Soviet models. The approaches based on the notions of human rights, transitional justice, and civil society would help speed up this process.