

# Georgiy Kasianov

## NATIONAL MASTER NARRATIVE: VICISSITUDES OF METHOD

### ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the historiographical, cultural and political phenomenon known as the national master narrative. Its cognitive, interpretative and explicatory potential is analysed together with its advantages and shortcomings. Drawing on Ukrainian historiography, the place of the national master narrative on the historiographical, cultural and political map is discussed. Its influence on the writing of history in modern Ukraine is also addressed.

### KEYWORDS:

national master narrative, essentialism, nation, Ukrainian historiography, analytical history

### GEORGIY KASIANOV

PhD in history, Professor, Head of the Laboratory for International Memory Studies at the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University of Lublin, employee of the Department of Ukrainian Historiography at the Institute of the History of Ukraine of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine (part-time).

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1996-0362>

This essay addresses the issue of the national historical narrative,<sup>1</sup> or the national master narrative, and its functions in the contemporary world. It is not a purely scholarly article packed with ritual references: it is rather an essay on a topic of possibly perennial relevance.

My reflections and arguments are mostly of a general nature, but I will illustrate them with cases of historical narratives which I believe to be most indicative of the topic under discussion. I cannot and do not intend to claim that I am offering innovative generalisations and arguments about the historical master narrative: all fundamental assessments were made at least half a century ago; hundreds of articles and dozens of seminal monographs have since been written on this and related topics. It would seem that the national master narrative has already become a purely historiographical phenomenon – a withered branch on the tree of historical knowledge, a museum exhibit.

Surprisingly, once in a while this withered branch starts sprouting leaves all of a sudden when brought to life by yet another ‘springtime of peoples’. A highbrow attitude or shrugging in bewilderment might be expected and even justified, but the mummy regularly acquires a new lease of life and shows remarkable resilience at the level of both affirmative and didactical history and, oddly enough, even in that part of historiography which tends to represent itself as analytical. For a variety of reasons (too numerous to be listed here), the national narrative remains attractive and popular in this brave world. For obvious reasons, adherents to and promoters of this narrative are, as a rule, incapable of self-reflection (which under certain circumstances, might be considered a benefit). Thus, the national master narrative requires reflection from the outside.

Finally, it is difficult to ignore the fact that, to begin with, practice makes perfect, and that the need to take a critical look at the master narrative and deconstruct it will be a useful exercise. Secondly, we are experiencing a renaissance of the master narrative yet again, especially in those places where the ethnocentric version of the past is again becoming the lifeblood of *sacro egoismo* and populism. One has to deal with the fact that the new generations of ‘persons of letters’, or rather ‘persons of bytes and pixels’, are for the umpteenth time discovering the simple and very user-friendly formulas of the national master narrative. Sometimes, or nearly always, they fail to realise that they are using rather worn-out formulas that have been replicated many times.

<sup>1</sup> The adjective ‘national’ which accompanies the term ‘master narrative’ may seem like a tautology. In this case, it is both deliberate and necessary.

It is these circumstances that make one recall and bring to attention well-known reflections and conclusions. I have chosen contemporary Ukrainian historiography as a specific example. Since we are talking about some generic features and characteristics of this phenomenon, I believe the reader will be able to use this example to recognise any other national historiography that pays tribute to the master narrative.

## THE NATIONAL MASTER NARRATIVE – GENERAL OUTLINE

One could formulate a brief definition of the master narrative as follows: it is a systematised, canonical version of a nation's past which claims the status and power of the universal norm.

The national master narrative is a phenomenon of the age of modernity and nationalism. Actually, the national master narrative is part of the 'project of modernity' in Habermas's sense. Its emergence and development is part of a general process of transition from an agrarian to an industrial society, the birth of the nation state, the advance of a mass politics, the formation of standardised national languages and high cultures, and the expansion of mass education, including history education.

Industrial society not only determines the birth of nations but also creates organisational, technical and cultural prerequisites for the formation of homogeneous forms of 'collective consciousness', described in detail by Karl Deutsch and Ernest Gellner a while ago. The spread of literacy on the basis of standardised and codified national languages, the emergence of the mass media, the standardisation of mass education together with transformation of schools and universities into a mass phenomenon, the technological advancement of information storage and transmission – all this creates an infrastructure for the formation of not only certain standard forms of 'mass/collective homogeneous consciousness' but also for activities that can have a great influence on the formation of collective consciousness, in particular the writing and teaching of history. Using a national master narrative to bond the nation together and ensure citizens' loyalty to the state would be impossible without mass literacy, standardised literary language, mass industrialised schooling that provides a stereotypical standard view of society, and the media.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the deliberate use of history and collective memory to impose dominant political discourses and form a system of loyalties became an integral part of states' domestic and foreign policy – a means of forming and legitimising nations as 'imagined

communities', a tool for political mobilisation.<sup>2</sup> 'Invented tradition', ideological unification and mobilisation achieve a certain level of cultural and political homogeneity that is necessary not only to ensure collective loyalty to the nation and state, but also in the waging of modern warfare; all this would not be possible without using history and creating a master narrative that endorses the existence of a certain nation on the space-time continuum.

In cases in which states did not exist or ceased to exist, the legitimising function of the master narrative was supplemented by the idea of emancipation – liberation from alien national or imperial oppression. It is also interesting to observe that the 'liberating' national master narratives of oppressed peoples often turned into instruments of dominance over minorities who claimed their own histories within the newly created states. In this sense, the history of Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans and the Baltic states in the 1920s–1930s and in the 1990s–2000s serves as an excellent example.

A well-founded critical and somewhat ironic attitude towards the national master narrative gradually developed in the professional writing of history after World War II. Of course, the reputation of this type of history writing was undermined by the fact that it became the ideological underpinning of two world wars, genocides, and crimes against humanity. Moreover, the development of domestic historiography could not but lead to a thorough reassessment of the national master narrative and identification of its numerous sins. Nevertheless, it was too deeply entrenched in political, cultural and educational practices to be easily abandoned. It moved from the shelf of analytical history to the rack of 'affirmative and didactical history'. At the same time, advanced historians resorted to collective exorcisms in order to expel from the writing of history the demons of ethnocentrism as well as cultural, gender, racial and other forms of intolerance. It is worth recalling that the first attempts to review national school history textbooks at the international level were undertaken in the interwar period, and this practice became global after 1945.

With further sophistication of the methods of humanities and social sciences and especially after a series of various 'turns' dating back to the 1960s which upended many professional criteria, norms and procedures in history writing, it seemed that the national master narrative had finally occupied its niche as a methodologically antiquarian phenomenon. Its potential aspirations or real ambitions to set standards for analytical historiography looked like an amusing joke.

<sup>2</sup> Of the most recent publications on this topic, see Stefan Berger and Christoph Conrad, *The Past as History. National Identity and Historical Consciousness in Modern Europe* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), a seminal review in terms of both scope and interpretation.

With the advent of globalisation, the development of communication and digital technologies, and the unprecedented permeability of political and cultural borders, the national master narrative became obsolete for advanced professional historiography. As a metanarrative, it circulated freely in the school environment and popular history. When it came to metanarratives associated with the history of peoples, it was more likely to be about transnational or supranational histories.

The collapse of the world communist system, the dissolution of the USSR and other quasi-supranational states (e.g., Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia), the reunification of Germany, and the radical change of the political, cultural and economic geography of the 1990s marked a renaissance of national master narratives. The volcanic eruption of national master narratives occurred in the 1990s. Nearly all nations that had achieved or regained national sovereignty faced the task of (re)constructing their 'true' past and inevitably resorted to the national master narrative. The reasons were obvious and prosaic: need for the legitimisation of new and 'old new' nation-states and their political and cultural elites; restoration of a 'proper' national identity which had been claimed to be distorted or almost destroyed by the communists.

In all cases, the revival or reconstruction of the national master narrative was presented as a restoration of 'historical justice', 'historical truth', 'national revival' or going 'back to one's roots'.

Undoubtedly, legitimacy was provided not only by political expediency or a nation's natural right to self-determination but also by scientific underpinnings, in particular by the existence of a ready-made national master narrative. Then, it transpired that some roots were strong and centuries old, and it was enough to add a favourable ideological climate and political care to turn them into Jack's magic beans, which gave rise to the powerful trunks and crowns of revived national narratives.

In Poland, for example, there were at least two quite credible variants of the national master narrative which did not seem to have suffered too much during Communist rule. In Ukraine, one can also speak of two variants of the historiographical tradition, both of which were officially banned at some point, but at least one of which was implicitly present throughout the Soviet period: this was known as Mykhailo Hrushevsky's scheme. Its populist essence fitted well into the class theory that dominated Soviet historical epistemology. In pre-1917 Russia, powerful schools

of historiography offered their own versions of the national master narrative.<sup>3</sup> Whenever such a historiographical tradition was lacking, the national master narrative was created from scratch, but its novelty was based on a canon that was more than a century old.

## STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

The national master narrative ensures the formation of the national identity and provides continuity; in this sense it also aspires to the role of collective memory, which often creates confusion when one tries to distinguish between history and memory. This incestuous connection, which seems quite natural to promoters of the master narrative, often sets a trap for its critics, who sometimes themselves fail to notice that they are being influenced by memory in historical discourse. One of the most striking examples is Pierre Nora's megaproject *Les Lieux de Mémoire* (realms of memory), in which the deconstruction of the national master narrative in fact provides strength to it – regardless of the intentions of the authors and the promoters of the project.

How does this type of narrative fulfil its important function? Firstly, it provides a description of the past, usually covering all key aspects of the nation's existence, a kind of biography of the nation. Secondly, it provides an explanation (which inevitably includes a clarification of the present and sometimes a projection of the future of the nation). Thirdly, it offers an interpretation – a meaningful account of the past which differs from the past of other communities and makes this particular community unique. Fourthly, it provides rationalisation – legitimisation of the uniqueness of a given community whose members recognise themselves as a nation.

Finally, as already mentioned, the essence of the master narrative is that it prescribes norms of description, explanation and interpretation, as it is essentially a set of canons whose acceptance or rejection determines one's loyalty to the community. In other words, it defines markers of national identity, compliance with which makes each particular individual a member of the nation. The most exhaustive form and formula of the national master narrative are definitely school textbooks, especially those published under the auspices of the state.

Ultimately, the national master narrative invests in civic education by setting norms for describing, explaining and interpreting the nation's

<sup>3</sup> In the case of Russia, 'national master narrative' is, in a sense, an oxymoron, since only a supranational narrative in the form of the history of multinational state (*gosudarstvo Rossiiskoie*) can act as a unifying scheme (given that the new version of the Russian Constitution of 2020 refers to 'the Russian people' as constituting 'the state-forming' entity). Even in its expansionist variant ('Russkij mir' [the pan-Russian world] and 'compatriots abroad'), the Russian national master narrative speaks Russian ethnocentrism into the concept of 'one people' and Orthodox unity.

past. This is why it becomes an instrument of indoctrination and patching the nation from within – a means of political mobilisation, a tool which is, as a rule, ultimately owned by the state. It ensures the political loyalty of citizens.

These ideological and political functions together with the normative power provoke the temptation to sacralise it in part or in full; in this case, it might morph into an ersatz civic cult.

What about the cognitive function of the national master narrative? Without it, the whole enterprise loses its fundamentality. Now, we have reached the 'fifth element'.

The formation of the master narrative accompanied the development of historiography as scholarship, as 'science'. Any self-respecting propagator of national history will definitely mention the 'solid scientific foundation' of the life history of a given nation. Thus, it would be at least impolite not to mention the master narrative's cognitive function. Nor should we forget that the canonical national narrative was shaped in the heyday of positivism, so its inherent feature would be an appeal to the 'proper' or 'true' knowledge based on 'documentary evidence', to national history as 'science'. Science, of course, means credibility, this latter being the truth.

Moreover, the national master narrative has been formed precisely as a scientific rationale for a nation's existence: it is a traditional toolkit of tricks and methods that give historiography the status of a scientific discipline. Notably, the invention of national master narratives in fact triggered the development of history as a scientific discipline.

However, it would not be out of place to mention Jean-François Lyotard's scepticism concerning the cognitive potential of the 'grand narrative' (*grand récit*) in which the master narrative fits. Of course, the national master narrative leaves some room for manoeuvre even for contemporary historians, but they will have to follow its prescriptions and conventions. By discovering new facts, finding previously unknown documents and dealing with new themes, a historian can indeed carry out inquiries, perform cognitive and analytical tasks, and formulate critical opinions, i.e., formally observe the procedures referred to as research.

The only problem is that the direction of the inquiry is predetermined, and the research procedure itself is meant to confirm the predetermined conclusion. The hypothesis (which is to be proved, specified or rejected by means of the research procedure) is in fact either absent or illusory (even if the researcher has good intentions). Moreover, this research procedure usually seeks to elucidate features of certain elements of the whole without questioning this bigger picture. Accounts of past events in the genre of national history must necessarily fit the context, descriptive

strategy and discourse of the master narrative. As already mentioned, school textbooks are an extreme version of such representation. For instance, in Ukraine and Russia, teachers or other interested parties can usually choose from several textbooks for one grade. However, all these different textbooks represent one meta-text.

Even if one discovers new evidence of crimes committed by a communist or colonial regime – calls something a crime for the first time, reaches the depths of archival wells and publishes all the documents proving the oppression of one nation by another or justifying a nation's eternal desire for freedom and statehood – in cognitive terms these efforts are like trying to crack a walnut whose kernel has already been eaten by other species of fauna.

In other words, the research takes place within an object which no longer evolves, and within a rather rigid interpretative or explanatory scheme. Although the national master narrative can reproduce itself endlessly, it will be unable to produce qualitatively new knowledge, new senses, new enquiries, since any such quest is focused on proving what is already proven and unquestionable within the broader albeit strictly limited framework. You are predestined to a perpetual Ground Hog Day; the only option is to make the existing picture more perfect.

A rather simple rhetorical question may arise: if the canon of the national narrative is true, and any such metanarrative denies the possibility of its being untrue or incompletely true – that is, the truth has been identified/discovered/established – where do we go from here? The cognitive process is over. We know everything.

## WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

This is the fourth time in the last twenty years that I have had to refer to the standard common features of the national master narrative.<sup>4</sup> During this time, the details or rhetoric might have been modified somewhat, but there is still a monolith of methods, principles and characteristics at its core

<sup>4</sup> I have addressed this topic on several occasions since 2002: Heorhij Kasianov, 'Šče ne vmerla ukrajins'ka istoriografija', *Krytyka*, 54.4 (2002), 20–22; Georgiy Kasianov, 'Sovremennaja ukrainskaja istoriografija: metodologičeskie i institucional'nye problemy', *Ab Imperio*, 2 (2003), 491–519; Georgiy Kasianov, 'Nationalized History: Past Continuous, Present Perfect, Future', in *Laboratory of Transnational History: Ukraine and Recent Ukrainian Historiography*, ed. by Phillip Ther and Georgiy Kasianov (New York–Budapest: CEU Press, 2009), pp. 7–24; Georgiy Kasianov, Oleksii Tolochko, 'National Histories and Contemporary Historiography: The Challenges and the Risks of Writing a New History of Ukraine', in *The Future of the Past. New Perspectives on Ukrainian History*, ed. by Serhii Plokhly (Harvard University Press, 2016), pp. 69–96.



that are little affected by weather conditions. Moreover, these favourable conditions have lately made it flourish.

I will limit myself to a very brief enumeration of its generic features. Based on my previous experience in publicising and discussing these theses, let me make one important remark up front: the list below is not a description of the *sins* of the national master narrative; it is a simple description; I do not intend to defile or repudiate this narrative, if only because in this case this is *mission impossible*.

Its teleological nature predetermines all other features. Here, the meaning and direction of the historical process are determined by a pre-defined goal: the creation/formation/becoming of a nation and, of course, the emergence of its state. The goal (or effect) is directly or implicitly identified with the cause; as a result, the idea of the genuine, natural and organic nature of the nation and nation state emerges of its own accord. Cognitive, explanatory and interpretative functions – let alone ideological and educational ones – serve this goal.

Essentialism is the other profound feature of the national master narrative that is closely related to its teleological nature. While the national master narrative implies the birth, lethargy, death, or revival of the nation, the latter is perceived as non-temporal. Time and space may simply not matter. Moreover, historians need a space-time continuum only in order to correctly identify the place and time of a nation's being. The historian's task is to adequately describe the nation in space-time with the help of the proper tools, i.e., to adequately identify the existence or absence of its essential attributes and prove the *historical necessity* and inevitability of the birth and existence of the nation. The historian finds these essential features in 'historical reality', which in turn becomes the measure of 'historical truth'.

The teleological and essentialist traits are most salient in the claim to cultural uniqueness and exclusivity, and often in the ethnocentrism of the national master narrative. A paradox of the internal contradiction of the national narrative lies in the fact that it is meant to make the world's history more complete and more exhaustive by incorporating the biography of one's own nation. That is, on the one hand, we are unique and incomparable; on the other hand, our history is at least not worse than anyone else's. In other words, the task of this narrative is to make one's own nation the sovereign actor of world history by concurrently singling it out and separating it from the general flow of similar narratives of Others.

The flip side of this inner contradiction is that the national master narrative aspires to be the most complete, comprehensive, exhaustive version of history, at least at the level of the key events and facts that

determine the nation's existence. However, this aspiration or intention is fulfilled at the expense of an intentional selection of facts, events, and lines of argumentation. Anything that deviates from the main line is either rejected, silenced, or ignored. Whenever something contradictory pops up, it is used to confirm the validity of the main thesis.

This main line predetermines another important feature of the national master narrative: the absolutization of the continuity of national history – its linearity. Historians working in the genre of the national narrative are reminiscent of a bobsledder: having begun the journey, they cannot but arrive at the predetermined endpoint; options are available only in terms of the speed. It is also noteworthy that continuity is not ensured by justifying its necessity; the continuity needs no proof, as it is contained in the very idea of the transcendence of the nation's being. Explanation is required in the case of a rupture, a caesura, the absence of a nation in space-time. This is the focus of the stories associated with the basic metaphor of those national narratives which emerged in the absence of the state and its support, among 'non-historical nations', to use Hegel's term.

Here we approach the concept of 'national revival' or 'national awakening'. Somewhat ironically, this applies not only to 'historical' nations but also to 'non-historical' nations which did not have a state at the time of the formation of nation states. *Deutschland erwache!* refers to a nation which once suffered from a quantitative overabundance of states. All the mystical symbolism of the nations of this vast region, which subsequently became the epicentre of two world wars, is associated with the metaphor of awakening and revival. The awakenings and revivals of the nations of this region would hardly have acquired this rhetoric without the romantic renditions of folk tales – sleeping or dead beauties awakened or resurrected by the kisses of beautiful princes played by bearded men dressed in dull costumes.

A historical narrative containing the metaphor of 'national revival' inevitably points to other distinctive features of the discourse of the national master narrative. The metaphorical nature of the national master narrative implies mythologisation: any national narrative contains a set of founding myths – an origin, a 'golden age', a cultural and/or civilizational mission, world-beating achievements, certain innate traits of a community (business acumen, adherence to democracy, a big heart, etc.). Abundance in metaphors is always accompanied by anthropomorphisms. The nation is presented as a living being that suffers, struggles, dies and reborn. It has a brain, a mind, a conscience, a backbone, a head, willpower, etc. Finally, the language of the national narrative is characterised by anachronisms that stem from the very procedure of forming such a narrative according

to the principle of retrospective history, where contemporary territory and community are projected into distant ages. A Frenchman of Arab descent lighting up a Galois is unlikely to realise that he is holding in his hands a certificate of belonging to a nation with a continuous history of a thousand years. However, historians who have traced the roots of modern France back to Gallic tribes are well aware of this.

Let us illustrate these general reflections with a concrete example. Over the last thirty years, I have observed several attempts to (re)construct a specific variant of the national master narrative in Ukraine; at some point, I even took part in this exciting enterprise.

## THE UKRAINIAN MASTER NARRATIVE

The classic Ukrainian master narrative was created by Mykhailo Hrushevsky from the late nineteenth century to the 1920s.<sup>5</sup> Conceptually, this project, which is gargantuan in length (ten volumes) and in terms of the amount of time it took to write it (almost thirty years), took shape in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when its author was an Austrian professor holding a passport as a subject of the Romanov Empire. His seminal ideas were originally presented in an article entitled 'Zvichajna skhema "russkoj" istoriji i sprava ratsional'nogo ukladu istoriji skhidnogo slov'anstva' (The Traditional Scheme of 'Russian' History and the Problem of the Rational Organisation of the History of East Slavs, 1903).

This version of the Ukrainian master narrative is usually described as representing 'populist' historiography. The people are the main actor here. Another variant of the Ukrainian master narrative associated with Vatslav (Viacheslav) Lypynsky is the so-called statist or conservative school of Ukrainian historiography. Although this division is an oversimplification, it provides grounds to speak of two variants of the Ukrainian national master narrative.

The 'Hrushevsky school' of historiography developed relatively freely in Soviet Ukraine until the mid-1930s and was banned as 'bourgeois and nationalist' during the repression of the 1930s and 1940s. The 1920s also saw an attempt to create an alternative school by Matvii Yavorsky, a legal expert from Galicia who studied the history of Ukraine in the 'Marxist way' and was in charge of its 'official historiography'. Yavorsky was first criticised for his obvious lack of professional historical knowledge; then,

<sup>5</sup> A rather detailed analysis of Hrushevsky's history of the construction of the Ukrainian national master narrative is provided by Serhii Plokyh, Professor of Ukrainian History at Harvard University. See Serhii Plokyh, *Unmaking Imperial Russia: Mykhailo Hrushevsky and the Writing of Ukrainian History* (University of Toronto Press, 2005).

in the 1930s, his unsuccessful 'school' was dismissed as 'nationalist', while its founder was executed in 1937.

In the late 1930s, the Soviets established special institutions charged with the task of developing the Soviet Ukrainian master narrative. In 1936, the Institute of the History of Ukraine of the Academy of Sciences of the Ukrainian SSR) was established. It compiled and published the first synthetic collective work on the history of Ukraine<sup>6</sup>, designated to replace Hrushevsky's version. During the ideological purges of 1946–1951, this version was purged as 'bourgeois and nationalist'. One of the main accusations was that it followed the canons of the Hrushevsky school. The then-First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine, Lazar Kaganovich, uttered the following metaphor: 'Hrushevsky and his school left thin, invisible threads which must be "chemically removed"'.<sup>7</sup> The Institute's 1947 plan included such topics as 'Criticism of Hrushevsky's bourgeois and nationalist concept and school'.<sup>8</sup> Paradoxically, this purely ideological label had a solid basis. Any attempt to construct a linear, coherent and comprehensive narrative could not ignore the monumental work of the 'father of Ukrainian history', not to mention the fact that the populist components of *Istoriija Ukrajinjy-Rusy* (History of Ukraine-Rus', 1898) fitted nicely with the new orthodox Marxist format of the official metanarrative based on the idea of the evolution of socio-economic formations and class struggle. It is well known that the model common to all historians was introduced by *Istoriija Vserossijskoj komunističeskoj partii (bol'shevikov). Kratkij kurs* (History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks): Short Course, 1938). Officially, Joseph Stalin is considered to be its author.

The *Istoriija Ukrajinjy RSR* (History of the Ukrainian SSR, 1953–56) followed the lead. It was published twice, in 1951 and 1956,<sup>9</sup> in two volumes in both Russian and Ukrainian. It practically became the first standard Soviet master narrative of Ukrainian history to be endorsed by the authorities as an acceptable standard, and it survived with slight modifications until the late 1980s. This standard was reproduced in a megaproject in the 1970s and 1980s, when the *Istoriija Ukrajinjy RSR* (History of the Ukrainian SSR, 1977–79) in eight volumes and ten books was published,<sup>10</sup> first in Ukrainian and subsequently in Russian. The Soviet Ukrainian master narrative did not reject the national component. The latter was secondary to the general idea of humanity's progress towards a classless,

<sup>6</sup> *Istoriija Ukrajinjy. Korotkij kurs*, ed. by Serhij Bjelousov and others (Kyjiv: Vydavnytstvo AN URSR, 1940).

<sup>7</sup> Mykola Koval', Oleksandr Rubl'ov, 'Instytut istoriji Ukrajinjy: pershe dvadcatyrichchia (1936–1956)', *Ukrajin'skyj istoričnyj žurnal*, 6 (1996), 50–68 (p. 61).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>9</sup> *Istoriija Ukrajinjy RSR*, ed. by O. Kasymenko and others, 2 vols (Kyjiv: Vydavnytstvo AN URSR, 1953–1956).

<sup>10</sup> *Istoriija Ukrajinjy RSR*, ed. by Arnol'd Shevelev and Yurii Kondufor, 8 vols (Kyjiv, Naukova dumka, 1977–1979).

internationalist (or rather nationless) society. It is worth noting that an important shift took place: the idea of a movement towards a society without nations shifted to a paradigm for the formation of a 'new historical community – the Soviet people'. In the mid-1980s, a new project *The History of Classes and Social Groups in the Ukrainian SSR* was launched. This version of the master narrative was supposed to show the path towards a classless society. The journey itself and further implementation of the scheme collapsed together with the Soviet Union.

Later adventures of the Ukrainian master narrative followed a standard scenario. In the second half of the 1980s, during 'perestroika and acceleration', with the advent of the glasnost era, the Soviet master narrative began to disintegrate. At first, it was criticised for silencing and tabooing uncomfortable topics (which was not solely its fault), and an attempt was made to review it by filling in the so-called blank spots of history. Then came the rejection of the Soviet master narrative as a basis of collective identity. The centrifugal processes in the USSR involved the revision and subsequent denunciation of the All-Soviet supranational master narrative as false, and a return of 'true' national histories.

The late 1980s and early 1990s saw the triumphant return of the Ukrainian national master narrative in its classical form. The whole selection of Hrushevsky's works, ranging from popular and journalistic writings to the *History of Ukraine-Rus*, were reprinted, as a result of which he was considered a classic of Ukrainian historiography. The new nation-builders, among them those who castigated Hrushevsky's concept, deliberately and without any serious reassessment or revision utilised it as a foundation for a new official historiography. The preface to the third edition of a collective volume on the history of Ukraine, which claimed to be an official version of the history of Ukraine, stated that the authors drew 'upon the solid foundation of Ukrainian historiography from the late nineteenth to the first third of the twentieth century, first of all the works of Hrushevsky'.<sup>11</sup> It is noteworthy that this collective work was to a certain extent a response to a challenge from outside.

In 1992, the book *Ukraine: a History*, by a Canadian professor of Ukrainian descent, Orest Subtelny (1941–2016),<sup>12</sup> reached Ukraine and became a bestseller (almost one million copies in total) not only as a popular version of history but also as a scientific guide (one could come across academic articles citing the book as a source).

<sup>11</sup> *Istoria Ukraïny: nove bachennia*, ed. by Valeriy Smolii (Kyiv: Al'ternatyvy, 2002), p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> Subtelny himself was somewhat perplexed by this success. When he was preparing the book for publication in Canada, he had a rather modest objective, as he put it: to present to the English-speaking world a popular outline of the history of a country whose existence came as a surprise to the majority of readers. In a private conversation with me at his home in Toronto (1990), he mentioned another reason: pointing to his five-year-old son, he said he had written the book for him.

This concise and reader-friendly book demonstrated the potential to update the national master narrative by reconceptualising some of its tenets. For example, teleology and essentialism were somewhat rejuvenated by placing the narrative in the context of modernisation theories. Still, on the whole, it fits into the canon of the master narrative by Hrushevsky. Interestingly, Subtelny's book immediately became an unofficial teaching guide at schools and institutions of higher learning. It also strongly affected the process of reconstruction of the Ukrainian national master narrative at the level of school history. As the author of a school textbook for the fifth grade wrote in his memoirs, 'Orest Subtelny helped us in the early 1990s to learn our own past, he awakened our consciousness, restored the genetic code which for centuries they had tried to erase, remove, wipe out by famines and executions'.<sup>13</sup>

In the early 1990s, work on a multivolume edition of the history of Ukraine began. The master narrative was to take shape in a solid form that was not inferior in scale to the previous Soviet megaproject. During an official event in 1993, President Leonid Kravchuk lamented that 'the Ukrainian people have no history of their own'. In response, the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine started working on a fifteen-volume *History of the Ukrainian People* – the title spoke for itself.

Rem Symonenko, an employee of the Institute of the History of Ukraine at the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, who struggled against the 'Ukrainian bourgeois nationalism' in history in Soviet times wrote about the major task of this work: 'the reinstatement of national history per se, its reinstatement as the past of the Ukrainian ethnos occupying its own autochthonous territory. Ukrainian history is understood here as a distinctive continuous process, whose main actor is the Ukrainian people, from its origins to modern sovereign statehood'.<sup>14</sup>

The dramatic socio-economic crisis of the 1990s halted this project: the state had no funds to finance it. A kind of semblance, a 'brief outline' of the updated and supplemented master narrative emerged in the form of the two-volume *Istoria Ukrainy: nove bachennia* (History of Ukraine: a New Vision, 1995–96),<sup>15</sup> subsequently reprinted as a textbook.

A new attempt to create a contemporary master narrative took the form of the fifteen-volume edition of *Ukrajina kriz' viky* (Ukraine Through the Ages, 1998–99).<sup>16</sup> This project was financed mainly by private sponsors,

<sup>13</sup> Viktor Misan, 'Jak my včyly istoriju: osobysti notatky pedahoha pro perše desjatlittja škil'noji istoričnoji sovity u nezaležnij Ukrajinі', *Ukrajina Moderna*, 22 August 2016 <<https://uamoderna.com/event/mysan-history-education-ukraine>> [accessed 22 September 2018].

<sup>14</sup> Rem Symonenko, *Do koncepciji bahatotomnoji 'Istotorniji ukrajins' koho narodu' (mižnacjonal'nyj ta mižnarodnyj aspekty* (Kyjiv: Instytut istorii Ukrainy AN Ukrainy, 1993), p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> *Istoriya Ukrajiny: nove bachennja*, ed. by Valeriy Smolij, 2 vols (Kyiv: Vydavnytstvo Ukraina, 1995–96).

<sup>16</sup> *Ukraina kriz' viky*, ed. by Valeriy Smolij, 13 vols (Kyiv: Al'ternativy, 1998–99).

while the authors were mostly scholars from the Institute of the History of Ukraine of the National Academy of Sciences. The publication was awarded a State Prize. It is noteworthy that, despite the unambiguous title, which follows the standard national narrative's idea of the 'Ukrainian millennium', the project in fact challenged some parts of the master narrative. Of course, some of the authors followed a century-old standard (for example, there was a separate volume devoted to the 'national revival of the nineteenth century'), but some clearly deviated from this canon. In fact, each volume represented its author's vision of a particular period of Ukrainian history. There were instances, as in the case of the volume devoted to Kievan Rus', where the co-authors had different approaches to some aspects of the topic.

This project is interesting in two ways. To begin with, apart from the comprehensive title and the agreement between the authors of individual volumes to fit their period into the general chronology of Ukrainian history, there was no prescriptive concept behind it (unlike in the case of the planned *History of the Ukrainian People*). Secondly, it was based on sources the authors had already collected at the time of writing. Thus, it did not imply lengthy research, reinterpretation or debate. That is, the author of each volume (and some of the books were written within two months) presented their own version of their period of Ukrainian history. In this sense, the project revealed the presence of historians in Ukraine who were clearly outside the mainstream – the classical Ukrainian master narrative.

This could also be traced in another international endeavour to write a regional history of Central and Eastern Europe which resulted in the publication of books by Natalia Jakovenko and Jaroslav Hrytsak. The outcome was paradoxical: as expected, the book by Jakovenko<sup>17</sup> went beyond the standards of the national master narrative, whereas, surprisingly, the volume written by Hrytsak, which was devoted to the history of Ukraine during the era of nationalism and communism, reproduced the standard narrative of 'nation-building' and 'national revival'<sup>18</sup> in terms of structure, description and, in many ways, interpretation, despite the ornamental use of modernist theories and rhetoric. Both pieces were published as textbooks.

In the 2000s, the national master narrative in Ukraine took the shape of the monumental *Encyklopedija istoriji Ukrajinjy* (Encyclopaedia of the History of Ukraine).<sup>19</sup> In 2003–13, almost seven hundred historians in Ukraine worked on this project. They produced ten volumes (two additional

<sup>17</sup> Natalija Jakovenko, *Narys istoriji Ukrajinjy z najdavnijšych časiv do kinceja XVIII stolittja* (Kyjiv: Heneza, 1997).

<sup>18</sup> Jaroslav Hrycak, *Narys istoriji Ukrajinjy: formuvannja modernoji ukrajins'koji naciji XIX–XX stolittja Navč. posibnyk* (Kyjiv: Heneza, 1996).

<sup>19</sup> An electronic version of this publication is available here: <http://www.history.org.ua/?l=EHUs>.

summary volumes, *Ukrajina-Ukrajinci* [Ukraine – Ukrainians] were published in 2018–19). Although in this case the conceptual unification and editing were inevitable, different approaches among both the adherents of the standard national master narrative and its critics and deconstructionists could also be traced in the encyclopaedia.

The most recent attempt to offer the state and society a national master narrative in the form of a multivolume publication occurred between 2010 and 2014. This initiative came from the leadership of the Institute of the History of Ukraine. Development of this publication's concept began in 2010 with the formation of a working group at the Institute. In 2012, the *Ukrajins'kyj istoryčnyj žurnal* started a column titled 'The Modern Ukrainian Grand Narrative: Approaches, Concepts and Implementation'.<sup>20</sup>

Discussions about the present and future of the Ukrainian national master narrative identified two main approaches. One was an attempt to modernise the national master narrative, in particular its rhetoric and theoretical underpinnings. The other approach implied that the national master narrative was 'unrepairable'; therefore, if it is to be a scholarly publication which fits the principles of analytical history, one should write not so much the 'history of Ukraine' but rather the 'history of Ukraine'.<sup>21</sup> In fact, discussions in the *Ukrajins'kyj istoryčnyj žurnal* were motivated by this second approach, although they had no practical implication.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, the events of the Fall-Winter of 2013/14 (called the Revolution of Dignity), the annexation of the Crimea, and the war in Eastern Ukraine have essentially taken these discussions off the table. The last articles based on these debates were published during the war, in which Russia played the role of aggressor. The national master narrative went off to war and became a tool for combatting the aggressor in hybrid warfare, primarily information warfare. Purely academic debates about the potential and limitations of the national master narrative contradicted the needs of war-time mobilization and propaganda.

<sup>20</sup> Valerij Smolij, 'Laboratorija ukrajins'koho naratyvu (vstupne slovo holovnoho naukovoho redaktora)', *Ukrajins'kyj istoryčnyj žurnal*, 5 (2012), 4–5.

<sup>21</sup> The material for a wider discussion was never published: *Istorija Ukrajinny: Materialy do rozrobky koncepciji nacional'noho brand-naratyvu. Zaprosennja do dyskusiji* (Kyjiv: Instytut istoriji Ukrajinny NAN Ukrajinny, 2011). Document provided by courtesy of Genadij Boryak.

<sup>22</sup> See Heorhij Kas'janov, Oleksij Toločko, 'Nacional'ni istoriji ta sučasna istoriohrafija. Vyklyky j nebezpeky pry napyssanni novoji istoriji Ukrajinny', *Ukrajins'kyj istoryčnyj žurnal*, 6, (2012), 4–22; Kyrylo Haluško, 'U pošuku common sense. Do dyskusiji z pryvodu nacional'noho brand-naratyvu', *Ukrajins'kyj istoryčnyj žurnal*, 1 (2013), 4–23; Oleksandr Majboroda, 'Nacional'na istorija zasluhovuje buty bil'se žyvoju niž mertvoju', *Ukrajins'kyj istoryčnyj žurnal*, 1 (2013), 24–28; Vadim Adadurov, 'Teoretčni zasady ta metodolohija vypsuvannja ukrajins'koi istoriji v jevropejs'kyj kontekst (pohľad istoryka-vsesvitnyka)', *Ukrajins'kyj istoryčnyj žurnal*, 2 (2013), 4–23; Robert-Pavlo Magočij, 'Konstruivannja čy dekonstrukcija? Jak povynna vyhljadaty 'majbutnja istorija Ukrajinny'?', *Ukrajins'kyj istoryčnyj žurnal*, 4 (2013), 4–7; Jaroslava Vermenyč, 'Lokal'no-rehional'ni rivni vitčyznjanoho naratyvu', *Ukrajins'kyj istoryčnyj žurnal*, 5 (2013), 4–23; Stepan Vidnjans'kyj, Andrij Martynov, 'Nacional'ni istoriji v metanaratyvi procesu globalizaciji: z jevropejs'koho dosvidu', *Ukrajins'kyj istoryčnyj žurnal*, 6 (2013), 4–16; Volodymyr Potul'nyč'kyj, 'Ščo do doslidnyč'kych pryoritetiv u spravi stvorennja novoho akademičnoho syntezy ukrajins'koi istoriji v konteksti istoriji svitovoji?', *Ukrajins'kyj istoryčnyj žurnal*, 1 (2014), 4–20; Oleh Horenko, 'Ukrajins'kyj metanaraty v epochu propagandy', *Ukrajins'kyj istoryčnyj žurnal*, 2 (2014), 4–21.



The above-mentioned discussions, of which I was a participant, reveal two major tendencies. Firstly, in Ukrainian professional historiography, a clear demarcation line between analytical history, on the one hand, and affirmative and instructive history, on the other, has been drawn. It is no longer necessary to argue that, despite the semblance of scholarship, the national master narrative belongs primarily to the sphere of ideology and politics. Its promoters openly claim its validity by the needs of the time. Moreover, among professional historians, one can easily find those who insist on the indispensability and usefulness of the ideological functions of the master narrative and who are willing to develop, promote and amplify these functions in every possible way. The same tendency can easily be found in neighbouring countries, such as Poland, Russia, Lithuania and Hungary. Here I am only listing examples that I know relatively well. The general dynamics of political development in the world, the rise of ethnic nationalism and populism as well as discursive totalitarianism indicate that the list of cases might be much more extensive.

## CONCLUSIONS

The national master narrative in either its classical or modified form looks rather archaic in the twenty-first century, at least from the point of view of history as a scientific discipline.

At one time, the national master narrative emerged as part of the movement towards modernisation, and its historiography was part of the modernity project. Currently, the appeal to the national master narrative, especially in its classical retro version, looks like an attempt at de-modernisation (the Ukrainian case being a classic example). Reference to the national master narrative can also be observed in countries that are catching up (all post-Soviet countries except for Russia and the Baltic states). It could also be a response to the challenges of globalisation, a defence mechanism (in this sense, it is heart-piercing to see the West and the East of Europe so united in that all pan-European historical projects proposed by supranational European structures are losing in an unequal competition against national master narratives).

In any manifestation, the cognitive function and potential of the national master narrative is exhausted. Its further use belongs to the field of ideology and patriotic education. This is where it rules despite numerous attempts at its revision from a variety of perspectives – historiographical and political, ethical, religious, gender, cultural, etc.

Of course, the reason for this sustainability has to do primarily with the role of the national master narrative in identity formation. Despite internationalisation, globalisation and the development of transnational and supranational cultural, political, economic, social and other structures, the division of the world into nations remains relevant. Moreover, globalisation, growing transparency and the non-obviousness of national borders create impulses that provoke the strengthening of ethnocentric national identities. Paradoxically, there emerge conditions and temptations for writing a 'global history of national historiographies', all of which – without exception – represent different examples of the same phenomenon: the national master narrative.<sup>23</sup>

Another paradox of the interaction between globalisation and the national master narrative is a new quality of the conflict. The birth of the national master narrative in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and two world wars are closely intertwined. Its renaissance in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, combined with a global information revolution, the transparency of cultural and political borders and rapid development of technological means of manipulating consciousness, create a new quality of conflicts between homogeneous narratives, especially those with an exclusive ethnocentric component. The exhausting and pointless conflict between Ukraine and Poland over the past is one of the best illustrations. The use of the elements of the national master narrative in information warfare is a distinctive feature of our times, whether the warfare takes place in Europe (Russia–Ukraine–Poland), Asia (China–Japan, Japan–Korea, India–Pakistan) or in North America, where emotions over the outcome and causes of the US Civil War run high even now.

It is noteworthy that in Europe a surge of ethnocentric versions of national history originated precisely in the integration processes. The collapse of the Communist system was only the first invitation to go back to one's roots and restore the 'true' past that the communists had allegedly distorted. The full reinstatement of the national master narrative also marked a return to a 'proper' life and 'proper' identity. The second act of the revival of the national master narrative and associated identity coincides precisely with the creation of a 'united Europe' in the mid-2000s. In this case, the national master narrative turned out to be a way of protecting the cultural sovereignty of the new member states of the EU.

The subsequent decade, mired by the immigration crisis, the collapse of the politics of multiculturalism, the Euro-area crisis, Brexit and the

<sup>23</sup> *Writing the Nation. A Global Perspective*, ed. by Stefan Berger (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 1

prospect of further EU exits, at least in terms of values, has only strengthened the legitimacy of nation states and their respective narratives.

The third decade of the twentieth century, which has opened with a global economic crisis, a pandemic, an infodemic and a crisis of confidence in transnational structures, is only likely to fuel the demand for nation states and 'to serve and to protect' national master narratives.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adadurov, Vadim, 'Teoretčni zasady ta metodolohija vpysuvannja ukrajins'koji istoriji v jevrops'kyj kontekst (pohljad istoryka-vsесvitnyka)', *Ukrajins'kyj istoryčnyj žurnal*, 2 (2013), 4–23
- Berger, Stefan, and Christoph Conrad, *The Past as History. National Identity and Historical Consciousness in Modern Europe* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015)
- Haluško, Kyrylo, 'U pošuku common sense. Do dyskusiji z pryvodu nacional'noho hrand-naratyvu', *Ukrajins'kyj istoryčnyj žurnal*, 1 (2013), 4–23
- Horenko, Oleh, 'Ukrajins'kyj metanaratyv v epochu propagandy', *Ukrajins'kyj istoryčnyj žurnal*, 2 (2014), 4–21
- Hrycak, Jaroslav, *Narysy istoriji Ukrajinny: formuvannja modernoji ukrajins'koji naciji XIX–XX stolittja* [Navč. posibnyk] (Kyjiv: Heneza, 1996)
- Istoriia Ukrain's'koi RSR*, ed. by Oleksandr Kasymenko and others, 2 vols (Kyjiv: Vydavnytstvo AN URSSR, 1953–1956).
- Istoriya Ukrajin's'koi RSR*, ed. by Serhij Bjelousov and others, 2 vols (Kyjiv: Vydavnytstvo AN URSSR, 1953–1956)
- Istotoriya Ukrajin's'koi RSR*, ed. by Arnol'd Ševeljev and Jurij Kondufor, 8 vols (Kyjiv, Naukova dumka, 1977–1979)
- Istoriya Ukrajinny*, ed. by Mykola Petrovs'kyj, 2 vols (Ufa: Vydavnytstvo AN URSSR, 1943), 1 (1943)
- Istoriya Ukrajinny. Korotkyj kurs*, ed. by Serhij Bjelousov and others (Kyjiv: Vydavnytstvo AN URSSR, 1940)
- Jakovenko, Natalija, *Narys istoriji Ukrajinny z najdavnišych časiv do kincja XVIII stolittja* (Kyjiv: Heneza, 1997)
- Istoriya Ukrajinny: nove bačennja*, ed. by Valeriy Smolij (Kyjiv: Al'ternatyvy, 2002).
- Istoriya Ukrajinny: nove bačennja*, ed. by Valeriy Smolij, 2 vols (Kyjiv: Vydavnytstvo Ukrajinna, 1995–1996)
- Kasianov, Heorhij, 'Šče ne vmerla ukrajins'ka istoriohrafija', *Krytyka*, 54.4 (2002), 20–22
- Kasianov, Georgij, 'Sovremennaja ukrainskaja istoriografija: metodologičeskie i institucional'nye problemy', *Ab Imperio*, 2 (2003), 491–519

- Kasianov, Georgiy, 'Nationalized History: Past Continuous, Present Perfect, Future', in *A Laboratory of Transnational History: Ukraine and Recent Ukrainian Historiography*, ed. by Phillip Ther and Georgiy Kasianov (New York–Budapest: CEU Press, 2009), pp. 7–24
- Kasianov, Georgiy, and Oleksij Toločko, 'National Histories and Contemporary Historiography: The Challenges and the Risks of Writing a New History of Ukraine', in *The Future of the Past. New Perspectives on Ukrainian History*, ed. by Serhii Plokhly (Harvard University Press, 2016), pp. 69–96
- Kas'janov, Heorhij, and Oleksii Tolochko, 'Nacional'ni istoriji ta sučasna istoriohrafija. Vyklyky j nebezpeky pry napysanni novoji istoriji Ukrajinu', *Ukrajin's'kyj istoryčnyj žurnal*, 6, (2012), 4–22
- Koval' Mykola, and Oleksandr Rubl'ov, 'Instytut istoriji Ukrajinu: perše dvadcatyričča (1936–1956)', *Ukrajin's'kyj istoryčnyj žurnal*, 6 (1996), 50–68
- Magočij, Robert-Pavlo, 'Konstruivannja čy dekonstrukcija? Jak povynna vyhljadaty "majbutnja istorija Ukrajinu"?', *Ukrajin's'kyj istoryčnyj žurnal*, 4 (2013), 4–7
- Majboroda, Oleksandr, 'Nacional'na istorija zasluhovuje buty bil'se žyvoju niž mertvoju', *Ukrajin's'kyj istoryčnyj žurnal*, 1 (2013), 24–28
- Misan, Viktor, 'Jak my včyly istoriju: osobysti notatky pedahoha pro perše desjatlittja škil'noji istoryčnoji sovity u nezaležnij Ukrajinu', *Ukrajin Moderna*, 22 August 2016 <<https://uamoderna.com/event/mysan-history-education-ukraine>> [accessed 22 September 2018]
- Narys istoriji Ukrajinu*, ed. by Kost' Huslystij and others (Ufa: Vydavnytvo AN URSR, 1942)
- Potul'nyc'kyj, Volodymyr, 'Ščo do doslidnyč'kych priorytetiv u spravi stvorennja novoho akademičnogo syntezy ukrajins'koji istoriji v konteksti istoriji svitovoji', *Ukrajin's'kyj istoryčnyj žurnal*, 1 (2014), 4–20
- Smolij, Valerij, 'Laboratorija ukrajins'koho naratyvu (vstupne slovo holovnoho naukovoho redaktora)', *Ukrajin's'kyj istoryčnyj žurnal*, 5 (2012), 4–5
- Symonenko, Rem, *Do koncepciji bahatotomnoji 'Istotorniji ukrajins'koho narodu' (mižnacional'nyj ta mižnarodnyj aspekty)* (Kyjiv: Instytut istoriji Ukrajinu AN Ukrajinu, 1993)
- Ukrajinu kriz' viky*, ed. by Valerij Smolij 13 vols (Kyjiv: Al'ternativy, 1998–1999)
- Vermenyc', Jaroslava, 'Lokal'no-rehional'ni rivni vitčyznjanoho naratyvu', *Ukrajin's'kyj istoryčnyj žurnal*, 5 (2013), 4–23
- Vidnjans'kyj, Stepan, and Andrij Martynov, 'Nacional'ni istoriji v metanaratyvi procesu globalizaciji: z jevropejs'koho dosvidu', *Ukrajin's'kyj istoryčnyj žurnal*, 6 (2013), 4–16
- Writing the Nation. A Global Perspective*, ed. by Stefan Berger (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007)