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NATIONAL AS POSTCOLONIAL: THE NARRATIVE OF THE HISTORY OF UKRAINE AS A COUNTRY STANDING AT THE GATES OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

Book Review: Serhy Yekelchyk, *Writing the Nation: The Ukrainian Historical Profession in Independent Ukraine and the Diaspora* (Stuttgart: ibidem, 2022)

I regard Serhy Yekelchyk's thematic collection of essays *Writing the Nation: The Ukrainian Historical Profession in Independent Ukraine and the Diaspora*[1] as being complementary to Yaroslav Hrytsak's synthesis of Ukrainian history *Подолати минуле. Глобальна історія України*,[2] also published in English as *Ukraine. The Forging of a Nation*.[3] Within a year and a half of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, therefore, two volumes were added to global Ukrainian studies: a new perspective on the entire history of Ukraine, as well as an analysis of the writing of this history in the diaspora as well as how it is written and taught in Ukraine. Whereas Hrytsak presented a visionary interpretation of the formation of the Ukrainian national community as a response to challenges from the West, Yekelchyk showed that contemporary Ukrainian historiography and teaching of history have adopted – and continue to do so – the achievements of Western humanities and social sciences.

Hrytsak's synthesis has now also been published in Polish.[4] Yet, the collection by Yekelchyk, an author known in Poland for his book *Ukraine. Birth of a Modern Nation*,[5] awaits a Polish translator. I think both volumes should be available in the languages of all countries today which have some interest – not only academic – in Ukraine. Without these books, it is impossible to understand how to interpret the past, how the future of Ukrainian society is defined by its intellectual elite, or how – taking the impact of Ukrainian intellectuals into account – it understands itself.

Yekelchyk, a history graduate from Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv who has since worked at the universities of Alberta (Edmonton), Michigan (Ann Arbor), and currently Victoria (Vancouver), is a scholar

1 Serhy Yekelchyk, *Writing the Nation: The Ukrainian Historical Profession in Independent Ukraine and the Diaspora* (Stuttgart: ibidem, 2022).
2 Jaroslav Hrycak, *Podolaty mynule. Hlobal'na istorija Ykrajiny* (Kyjiv: Portal, 2021).
3 Yaroslav Hrytsak, *Ukraine. The Forging of a Nation*, trans. by Dominique Hoffman (London: Little, Brown Book, 2023).
4 Jarosław Hrycak, *Ukraina. Wyrwać się z przeszłości* (Kraków: MCK, 2023).
5 Serhy Yekelchyk, *Ukraina. Narodziny nowoczesnego narodu* (Kraków: WUJ, 2009).

of subjects such as social images of the past and the place of politics in the lives of people in Ukraine in the Stalinist period.[6] His latest publication is a series of essays on historiography and historical education in contemporary Ukraine. By linking this issue with changing beliefs about the history and identity of Ukrainian society between 1991 and 2022, he has ensured that there is also an aspect of political science in this work.

With the above in mind, I will focus particularly on showing the elements of Yekelchyk's book that contribute to explaining what is happening in the historiographical space in Ukraine and around it in the world today and what, in my view, it would be useful to add. I will look at the latter from the angle of the suitability of the author's proposed narrative on Ukrainian history for the needs of a country aspiring to join the EU. In the final section, I will outline what is missing in the book and what could expand upon the research it presents. I am concerned with dealing with the social functioning of beliefs about the past in Ukraine. Such research requires combining the efforts of scholars of historiography and the history of ideas with sociologists of identity and collective memory. Yekelchyk, with his insight as an experienced researcher of historiographical discourses, would be an indispensable partner in such studies.

Yekelchyk cites three arguments to justify the major role played by the historiography of Ukrainian history in recent decades:

- The Ukrainian diaspora has played a fundamental role in shaping the contemporary historical narrative of Ukraine – as a guardian of concepts prohibited in the USSR and a guide that introduces scholars in the homeland to the world of Western research methodologies.
- Studying Ukrainian history has become increasingly global; the boundary between researchers from the homeland and from the diaspora has been breached; the former participate in international research projects and academic debates on a level footing with Western historians.
- The increasingly globalised study of Ukraine's history is challenging the neo-imperial historical narrative of contemporary Russia on a scale no smaller than the challenge that Mykhailo Hrushevsky laid down to the Russian Empire in the early twentieth century by establishing a separate paradigm of national history.[7]

6 Serhy Yekelchyk, *Stalin's Empire of Memory: Russian-Ukrainian Relations in the Soviet Historical Imagination* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2004); Serhy Yekelchyk, *Stalin's Citizens: Everyday Politics in the Wake of Total War* (New York: Oxford University, 2014).

7 Mychajlo Hruševs'kyj, 'Zvyčajna schema "russkoji" istoriji j sprava racional'noho ukladu istoriji schidnoho slov'janstva', *Stat'i po slavjanovedeniju*, 1 (1904), 298–304.

Using these arguments, Yekelchyk first identifies a conclusive breakdown in the barriers in cooperation between the country and the diaspora. He also points to the success of the diaspora's strategy in the last fifty years or so,[8] involving long-term, patient support of independent research in Ukraine; finally, he predicts a time when historiography in the country will be cleansed of the influence of Soviet-era methodology and language. Although, as he shows, until 2022 this influence was still significant in the explanation of the course of history and structure of narrative, proposals emerging in the diaspora before 1991 were already dominant at the conceptual level of the synthesis of Ukrainian history. These were supplemented both by concepts and theories proposed by scholars from the field of global nation and nationalism studies (mainly Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson, Miroslav Hroch and Roman Szporluk), and by the individual concepts of authors who, after the opening of an exchange between the diaspora and the country around 1990, called upon both the first and the second sources.[9]

In making these three arguments, Yekelchyk connects the geopolitical and identity-based processes of transformation in Eastern Europe with the historiographical process. He shows that researching and interpreting Ukrainian history is, in some way, part of the struggle with Russia's aggression against Ukraine. He interprets this struggle as a fight for universal values. This perspective views historians dealing with Ukraine's past as representing an open civic concept of the nation and state and an orientation towards European integration that encompasses all the nation-states in the continent that fulfil the relevant criteria.

The crux of the book is the answer to the question of whether it is possible to find a perspective on Ukrainian history that encompasses three criteria: firstly, one that takes the national community as its essential subject; secondly, one not influenced by Soviet and neo-imperial Russian models; and thirdly, one taking into account the dominant trend in contemporary Western historiography that avoids accounts of history that use the traditional "national paradigm", instead adopting transnational and regional interpretive frameworks as more modern and resistant to mythologisation and politicisation. While the first and second aspects seem easy to combine, and the second and third appear possible, connecting the first with the third is difficult at best. However, the author ultimately

8 Meaning the period approximately since 1976 and the formation of the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, the main research institution in the Ukrainian diaspora community in the world.

9 Natalja Jakovenko, *Narys istoriji Ukrajiny vid najdavnišych časiv do kincja XVIII stolittja* (Kyjiv: Heneza, 1997); Jaroslav Hrycak, *Narys istoriji Ukrajiny: formuvannja modernoji ukrajins'koji naciji XIX–XX stolittja* (Kyjiv: Heneza, 1996); Serhii Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine* (New York: Basic Books, 2015) (Ukr. ed.: Serhij Plochij, *Brama Jevropy. Istorija Ukrajiny vid skifs'kych vojen do nezaležnosti* (Charkiv: KSD, 2016).

resolves this problem by placing the proposed narrative on Ukraine's history in a postcolonial studies perspective.[10] He argues that the view of both Ukrainian history and the country's present-day political situation constructed since the Orange Revolution are – in terms of mainstream changes – simultaneously anti-Soviet, anticolonial and pro-European, as well as based on a civic and culturally heterogeneous concept of the nation.

Yekelchyk argues that the sequence of political events in Ukraine in 2004, 2014, 2019 and 2022 created circumstances conducive to not only the ultimate formation of a narrative about its history based on the outlined premises but also its dissemination and internalisation by society, especially in the context of its expectations of accession to the EU. In the final part of this text, I will return to the question of the future challenges for which this narrative will prepare Ukrainian society, but for now I will briefly present the author's main themes and arguments.

DIASPORA AND COUNTRY: MISSION ACCOMPLISHED?

Yekelchyk's presentation of the interaction between historiography in Ukraine and its diaspora in the period since 1991 is, I believe, an accurate reflection of reality. The scholar writes: "[i]n the 1990s. the 'national paradigm' of Ukrainian history – a grand narrative focusing on the Ukrainian ethnic nation's struggle for its own state – replaced Soviet models of 'socialist construction' and the 'friendship of peoples' with a similar sort of dogmatism" (p. 34). He adds that this happened not entirely in the way that diaspora historians imagined, but still with their overwhelming participation. Specifically, Orest Subtelny's then-popular synthesis[11] – on the one hand incorporating the premises of the national paradigm, but on the other supplemented by other influences such as "Miroslav Hroch's scheme of the three-stage development of national movements in stateless nations and Bohdan Krawchenko's sophisticated sociological analysis of overcoming the 'incompleteness' of the nation's social structure" (p. 36) – was read in Ukraine in the simplest way. This meant an interpretation suggesting that the author had started with a primordialist understanding of the nation and justified the thousand-year continuity of the Ukrainian nation's

10 The historians whose texts are compiled in a book edited by Georgiy Kasianov and Philipp Ther, *A Laboratory of Transnational History: Ukraine and Recent Ukrainian Historiography* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2009) proposed combining particularly the second and third element, resulting in a perspective that, while intellectually interesting, shifted the nation to such a distant position that I suspect the country's contemporary inhabitants would find it hard to find themselves. Kasianov also recently voiced scepticism about the use of a colonial perspective in a narrative about Ukraine's history – Georgiy Kasianov, 'Nationalist Memory Narratives and the Politics of History in Ukraine since the 1990s', *Nationalities Papers*, 2023, 1–20.

11 Orest Subtelny, *Ukraine: A History*, 4 eds (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988, 1994, 2000, 2009) (Ukr. ed. I: Orest Subtel'nyj, *Istorija Ukrajiny* [Kyjiv: Lybid', 1991]).

desire for independence. The concepts of diaspora historians therefore contributed to the 'nationalisation' of Ukrainian history at home, as well as to the renewed legitimisation in post-1991 research of eulogists of the "centuries-old aspiration of the Ukrainian nation with the brotherly Russian nation". At the same time, these diaspora historians brought domestic historiography closer to the models employed in Western scholarship by disseminating the concepts of such figures as Omelian Pritsak, Ihor Ševčenko, Roman Szporluk and, above all, Ivan Lysiak-Rudnytsky.

Nevertheless, Yekelchyk argues, inspirations in the three decades since 1991 have no longer been confined to one direction. Increasingly, domestic historians have taken on the baton of reception of modern approaches. Whereas Ukraine in the 1990s witnessed attempts to adopt the concepts of representatives of the diaspora, such as in the aforementioned syntheses by Yakovenko and Hrytsak, in the next two decades monographic works took inspiration from international sources in the fields of regional history, new social history, oral history and women's history, without the mediation of historians from Ukrainian studies centres in Canada and the United States (examples being such authors as Kateryna Dysa, Andriy Zayarnyuk, Volodymyr Masliichuk and Tatiana Zhurzhenko). Yekelchyk's ultimate verdict on the central state research institution, the Institute of History of Ukraine at the National Academy of Sciences in Kyiv, is quite positive. With its leadership's considered strategy of investing in rejuvenating and training staff, it gradually transformed from being a mainstay of post-Soviet interpretive patterns and an upholder of positivist methodology in the 1990s to become today one of the most important sites of modern research on Ukraine's past.

Yekelchyk's summary of the more than three decades of direct relations between the diaspora and the domestic scene sounds almost like an acknowledgement that the former's mission has been accomplished: "[a]s Ukraine enters the fourth decade of its independent state existence, historical scholarship is coming of age as a worthy partner in the family of the world's 'national' yet increasingly international historiographies" (p. 53). On the other hand, Yekelchyk certainly shows that profound changes have taken place in Ukraine at the level of the participants of international and domestic academic historical debates, while to a lesser degree reaching Ukrainian historiography in a broader sense, and particularly academic institutions in smaller centres and school textbooks.

In-depth analysis of the accomplishments and current state of both sides of the relationship provides the main content of Yekelchyk's book. Regarding the first side, there is no exaggeration in his verdict on the fundamental role of the diaspora's academic centres as a laboratory in

which a shift in the understanding of Ukrainian history took place in the half-century following the Second World War. From Hrushevsky's territorial and ethnic-cultural perspective, which was dominant until 1939, it moved to a view constructed around the history of the historical imagination and autonomist initiatives of social elites, cultural and identity transformations, Ukraine's twentieth-century territorial and political integration, and finally modernisation processes and the emergence of new social classes. As it ultimately turned out, this shift provided authors of narratives on Ukraine's history with more arguments for its continuity than Hrushevsky's populist concept. As the author argues, the main contributions to developing a new concept of Ukrainian history in the diaspora were made by Viacheslav Lypynsky, Dmytro Doroshenko, Oleh W. Gerus, Ivan Lysiak-Rudnytsky and Orest Subtelny.

Yekelchyk discusses the sociological interests of Lypynsky, who emphasised the role of elites in the history of Ukraine and, together with Doroshenko, laid the foundations of the statist school in Ukrainian historiography. As such, Lypynsky became the source of inspiration for Lysiak-Rudnytsky and Subtelny, historians whom the author identifies as the founders of the narrative integrating the premises of the populist and statist schools. Analysing Doroshenko's contribution, meanwhile, Yekelchyk highlights two roles: first, as the author of a concise synthesis of the history of Ukraine; second, as a historian who became the first – visiting Canada twice with a series of lectures (in 1936 and 1947) – to popularise interest in this history on the American continent, including in the diaspora community itself. Yekelchyk cites Gerus as the scholar who developed Doroshenko's synthesis of Ukraine's history to include the period from the 1920s to the 1970s. In doing so, he restored to Ukrainians in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic the role of the main entity in the country's history following the Ukrainian Revolution of 1921, whereas for Doroshenko it was the diaspora that was the mainstay of national identity and activity.[12]

Not without reason, the author attributes a fundamental role in the history of Ukrainian historiography to Lysiak-Rudnytsky. Yekelchyk presents him as the founder and most eminent representative of the Ukrainian "history of social thought", meaning a way of reflecting on the past that combines the history of ideas with social history. The author laments the fact that this historian was not well understood in Ukraine after 1991. Although he began to be cited very frequently, this was generally by scholars vaguely seeking to legitimise their own arguments. They were also unable to adopt his methodology, which assumes, following Max Weber,

12 See Dmytro Doroshenko, *History of the Ukraine* (Edmonton: Institute Press, 1939); Dmytro Doroshenko, *A Survey of Ukrainian History*, ed. by Oleh W. Gerus (Winnipeg: Humeniuk Publication Foundation, 1975).

interdependency but also "relative autonomy of two large spheres of human existence: culture and ideological processes and social processes" (p. 110). Furthermore, according to Yekelchyk, Lysiak-Rudnytsky's approach represented a challenge not only to historians in Ukraine but also previously to some representatives of the diaspora. This was because it corresponded to defining the nation in a way closer to the later constructivists, with Benedict Anderson ("imagined community") foremost among them, thereby excluding a "primordialist approach arguing in favour of the eternal existence of Ukrainians". As Yekelchyk writes, Lysiak-Rudnytsky represented a concept of the nation "according to which language and other ethnic characteristics per se do not create a nation. Most important is the awareness of oneself as a political community and active subject of history" (p. 112).

The majority of representatives of Ukrainian humanities after 1991 refer to Lysiak-Rudnytsky as a historian who supposedly justified the exclusive belonging of the Ukrainian historical process to Western history. This is something that Yekelchyk explains less as a misunderstanding and more as a process of canonisation with the conscious approval of its participants. As the author shows, certain scholars – keen to prove to their own society and the world that Ukrainian culture was and continues to be European through and through – cited certain views from Lysiak-Rudnytsky's essay 'Ukraine between East and West',[13] disregarding neighbouring opinions in such a way as to make the ultimate meaning of the statement unambiguous. However, as Yekelchyk points out, while this historian placed a strong emphasis on the congruities and similarities between phenomena from Ukrainian and Western history, he also maintained that the Eastern influence on Ukraine was equally significant in the past. In the conclusions, as Yekelchyk reminds us, Lysiak-Rudnytsky argued that the mission "to unite the two traditions [of the East and West] in a living synthesis" (p. 201) remains unaccomplished in Ukraine.

Yekelchyk praises Lysiak-Rudnytsky, who died prematurely in 1984, above all for calling upon his colleagues for critical self-reflection, "which should help rid Ukrainian scholarship of its age-old affliction – the 'subjective-romantic treatment' of a research subject, which was expressed stylistically through 'patriotic emotionality and tendentiousness'" (p. 115).

Subtelny, meanwhile, was for Yekelchyk primarily the author of a synthesis of Ukraine's history whose popularity in the 1990s made the greatest contribution to the domestic reception of the achievements of diaspora historiography.[14] By emphasising the process of socioeconomic moderni-

13 Ivan Lysjak-Rudnyc'kyj, 'Ukrajina miž Schodom i Zachodom, politykoju', in *Miž istorijeju ta politykoju: Statti do istoriji i krytyky ukrajins'koji suspil'no-polityčnoji dumky*, ed. by id. (Mjunchen: Sučasnist', 1973), pp. 5–16.
14 Subtel'nyj, *Istorija Ukrajiny*.

sation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and recognising it as a change resulting in the development of the Ukrainian national movement, he made his synthesis relatively easy to adopt for historians from the former Ukrainian SSR, who continued to interpret the history of the Soviet republics as a modernising project.

Yekelchyk's essays also show the roles played by other historians who have contributed to the formation of Ukrainian research centres in Canada and the United States. These include – to mention only those with the largest output – Paul Robert Magocsi, the author of a synthesis of Ukrainian history constructed in line with the premises of Canada's contemporary multiculturalism policy;[15] Zenon Kohut and Frank Sysin, authors of studies on the early modern period;[16] Volodymyr Kravchenko, a specialist in urban history and the history of the Ukrainian-Russian borderland in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries;[17] Serhy Plohy, whose books include an intellectual biography of Hrushevsky[18] and a volume on the relations between religion and identity in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Ukraine;[19] and, finally, John-Paul Himka, perhaps the historian in the (currently) older generation of the diaspora with the broadest interests and widest spectrum of research methods. It is to Himka, Yekelchyk claims, that Ukrainian historiography owes the use of the theory of Marxism for analysis of the emergence of the class system and the socialist movement in Galicia in the nineteenth century,[20] the constructivist approach in the study of Ukrainianism and Ruthenianism as alternative directions of national identity formation in the eastern part of the province,[21] and critical reflection on the concept of the region in historiography in studies of representations of Last Judgement icons in the Carpathian Mountain region[22] as well as on the Ukrainian nationalist radical movement's participation in the Holocaust in Ukraine.[23]

As a result, in Yekelchyk's essays, Ukrainian historiography in the diaspora appears to be an exceptional phenomenon compared to the historiography of nations whose elites escaped in the twentieth century to

15 Paul R. Magocsi, *A History of Ukraine: The Land and Its Peoples*, 2 eds (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1987, 2010, rev. 2013).
16 Zenon E. Kohut, *Making Ukraine: Studies on Political Culture, Historical Narrative, and Identity* (Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, 2011), Frank E. Sysyn, 'The Khmelnytsky Uprising and Ukrainian Nation-Building', *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*, 17 (1993), 141–70.
17 Vladimir Kravčenko, *Char'kov/Charkiv: stolica Pogranič'ja* (Vilnius: European Humanities University, 2010).
18 Serhii Plokhy, *Unmaking Imperial Russia: Mykhailo Hrushevsky and the Writing of Ukrainian History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).
19 Serhii Plokhy and Frank E. Sysyn, *Religion and Nation in Modern Ukraine* (Edmonton–Toronto: CIUS Press, 2003).
20 John-Paul Himka, *Socialism in Galicia: The Emergence of Polish Social Democracy and Ukrainian Radicalism* (Cambridge, MA: HURI, 1983).
21 John-Paul Himka, 'The Construction of Nationality in Galician Rus': Icarian Flights in Almost All Directions', in *Intellectuals and the Articulation of the Nation*, ed. by Ronald G. Suny and Michael D. Kennedy (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), pp. 9–64.
22 John-Paul Himka, *Last Judgment Iconography in the Carpathians* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).
23 John-Paul Himka, *Ukrainian Nationalists and the Holocaust: OUN and UPA's Participation in the Destruction of Ukrainian Jewry, 1941–1944* (Stuttgart: ibidem, 2021).

the countries of the West from Russian and Soviet rule in Central and Eastern Europe. In no other nation in the critical years of 1989–1991 did émigré historians play such a major intellectual as well as organisational role (mainly by funding research) as in the case of Ukraine. At the same time, the author's analysis shows how historiography in the diaspora was affected by limitations resulting from its physical distance from the country. Before Ukraine gained independence, its representatives concentrated on researching intellectual history and reconceptualising perspectives on national history in the light of the challenges posed by global historiography. They could only begin research in Ukraine – both archival and social, conducted together with representatives of other disciplines – after the country crossed the threshold of state sovereignty in 1991.

As for the other side of the relationship – the domestic situation – Yekelchyk sketches a picture in which historiography for around the first 20 years after 1991, not including researchers maintaining contacts with Western scholarship, continued to be influenced by Soviet academia. This concerned both terminology and the way of understanding causality in history and the interpretation which saw Ukraine's past as being filled with the experiences of the nation, understood as an ethnic community unchanged over millennia. The aforementioned circumstance – dealing with economic subjects that were privileged in the Soviet period –additionally influenced the broad reception of Subtelny's synthesis and had a negative impact on the wider methodological openness of Ukrainian historians. Those who had long devoted themselves to economic research introduced into their arguments, instead of the category of social class, that of the nation, yet they stuck to their previous explanations. As Yekelchyk shows, for some diaspora historians this at first even seemed rather convincing as they wrongly thought that the Marxism in historiography in Ukraine was no longer Soviet Marxism but increasingly Western neo-Marxism, serving as a research methodology in social history. Ultimately, the author perceptively explains the source of neo-Marxism's failure to play an inspirational methodological role in Ukraine that would have fostered the deconstruction of the Soviet legacy in historiography. In his view, this would have happened if it had also been accompanied by reception of the "linguistic turn" in Western humanities. Without this, Western inspirations in the country were adopted in a way that did not affect the existing customary explanations of social reality.

Yet there is one area in which Yekelchyk's view on domestic historiography is brighter. This concerns the continuation of the Ukrainian traditions of spatial history, dating from the 1920s, when Hrushevsky

developed research on the regions of Southern Ukraine.[24] Although regional studies in the country were forced to a halt by Stalinist centralisation, they were then revived in subsequent decades. They were, let's add, an asset of Ukrainian historiography in comparison to the country's western neighbours, where (in Poland, for instance) stronger nationwide integration in terms of territory and identity in the twentieth century was not conducive to their development. Today, as Yekelchyk shows, this tradition is gaining a methodological impetus from Western urban history studies. This is resulting, on the one hand, in the publication of innovative works by authors of the middle and younger generation, both in Ukraine and in the diaspora; on the other hand, it is resulting in urban history research and activity of popularisation centres, spearheaded by the Centre for Urban History of East Central Europe in Lviv.

The author summarises the state of historiography in Ukraine in the first two decades after 1991 as follows: "the wholesale restoration of the traditional canon of national history was accomplished in Ukraine without abandoning Soviet narrative models or conceptualization tools. As a result, the 'national' version of the Ukrainian past looks surprisingly 'Soviet', and belated resistance to this Soviet legacy is taking the form of questioning the national history paradigm, in which both the teleological vision and the template of collectively written multivolume histories point to the historiographical practices of the Soviet past" (p. 73). To use a vivid adage, Yekelchyk's comment regarding critics of the "national" paradigm sounds like a warning not to "throw the baby out with the bathwater". Those impatient historians seeking to modernise historiography in Ukraine argue in favour of stripping the nation of the role of the basic entity that gives meaning to the narrative about the country's history. Yekelchyk does not state whose criticisms in particular he has in mind; however, he clearly confirms his support for the idea that Ukraine still needs a narrative that has the history of the nation at its core.

THE POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES PERSPECTIVE IN THE NARRATIVE ON UKRAINE'S NATIONAL HISTORY

Let's return to the most important point that Yekelchyk argues in the book: the use of a postcolonial studies perspective in the narrative about Ukraine's history. The author's argument in favour of its application is twofold: first, Ukraine's past is characterised by a certain colonial experience;

24 Mychajlo Hruševs'kyj, 'Krok i bil'še v istoriji Ukrajiny: Kil'ka sliv ščodo pljanu i perspektyv c'oho doslidžennja', *Ukrajins'kyj istoryk*, 3–4 (1991–92), 54–68.

secondly, the postcolonial narrative corresponds to contemporary social expectations. Regarding the first argument, it is based on the stance of literary and cultural scholars from the diaspora, notably George Grabowicz, as well as domestic researchers who have followed their lead, with Tamara Hundorova prominent among them.[25] Yekelchyk posits that the rule of Russia/the USSR (seventeenth to twentieth centuries) and Poland (fourteenth to eighteenth centuries) had colonial characteristics in the form of cultural discrimination of Ruthenians/Ukrainians. These did not have a racial aspect (as in classical West European colonialism) as they did not close the path of individual advancement to the population of Ukraine as a cost of assimilation to the dominant culture, but they discriminated against it as a whole by refusing to recognise it as a separate nation and denying its right to realisation of its own political aspirations. The consequence of this discrimination, Grabowicz argued, was and continues to be the collective traumas of Ukrainians.[26] We might add that the scholars holding this view were not historians and, as such, did not broach the question of whether Ukraine under the rule of these two states also experienced the next feature of classical colonialism, namely socioeconomic exploitation. Yekelchyk does not answer this question directly, although one can assume that his view on this matter would not be unequivocal. It is necessary to add that nineteenth-century rule and Soviet rule featured no fewer examples of treating Ukrainian lands as a place of modern investments and development than as an area of absolute exploitation to the benefit of the centre. The author just points out that the representatives of academic Ukrainian historiography did not recognise Ukraine's status in the empire as colonial – neither in the diaspora nor domestically.[27]

I find no reason to challenge Yekelchyk's interpretation of the state of Ukrainian society's beliefs after 1991 as postcolonial. There is no space here to discuss how many (and which) criteria the history of a given country should fulfil to be included in the history of colonial nations. I agree with the Yekelchyk, however, that Ukrainian society – although this term was not used outright in public debate until the Orange Revolution (with few exceptions) and has only become more widespread since Euromaidan – saw itself, and continues to do so, as a postcolonial society. Reckoning with this social fact justifies the adoption of a postcolonial studies perspective for the narrative on Ukrainian history.

Yekelchyk adds a new argument to document this state of Ukrainians' beliefs about their country's history. He interprets Mark von Hagen's

25 Tamara Hundorova, *Tranzytyvna kul'tura: Symptomy postkolonial'noji travmy* (Kyjiv: Hrani-T, 2013).
26 George G. Grabowicz, 'Ukrainian Studies: Framing the Contexts', *Slavic Review*, 54 (1995), 674–90.
27 I share Yekelchyk's view on the Polish governments in Ukraine until the collapse of the state in 1795 as satisfying certain criteria of the colonial type.

call in 1995 to search for other models for the narrative about Ukraine's history than those based on the principle of the European nation state,[28] as well as certain views expressed subsequently in international debate, as expressions of a belief in the suitability of the colonial angle for this history. Yekelchyk argues that the appeal was understood not quite as von Hagen intended it, which was to give studies of Ukraine's history a legitimised status in global scholarship equal to that enjoyed by research on the history of Russia and Poland. This interpretation by Yekelchyk is also convincing.

In my view, moreover, with his analysis of both the ways of writing the history of general and Ukrainian culture in that century and the narrative and construction of post-1991 national history textbooks, Yekelchyk makes an important contribution to showing that the Ukrainian elites' convictions about the past in the twentieth century were – and those of the entire society today are – postcolonial in nature.

Yekelchyk refers to the 1991–2005 period (until the Orange Revolution) in Ukrainian culture and humanities as a time of post-Soviet neo-imperial hybridity. Regarding the syntheses of cultural history published in this period, he pertinently argues that this hybridity following independence was primarily a consequence of a continued emphasis on ethnic culture, with the difference that this culture – in contrast with Russian culture – having ceased to be East Slavic (Ruthenian) and begun to be a strictly Ukrainian one. It is a great asset of the book that Yekelchyk highlights the co-occurrence[29] of various diverse or even contradictory features. Among these are the myth of Ukraine as a source of achievements of general civilisation; acknowledgement of Russian culture as one that, together with Western cultures, produced the most outstanding achievements of human civilisation; the distance towards contemporary Western culture as questioning traditional values; the understanding of Ukrainian national culture as exclusively high culture and the resultant ignoring of the fact that mass culture in Ukraine was chiefly Russophone; and understanding Ukrainian culture as a solely ethnic culture, resulting in omission of the cultures of national minorities.

To conduct an analysis of textbooks for teaching Ukraine's history from the three decades after 1991, Yekelchyk starts from the positions of classical postcolonial studies.[30] On this basis, he treats the interpretation

28 Mark von Hagen, 'Does Ukraine Have a History?', *Slavic Review*, 54 (1995), 658–73.

29 Either in different textbooks functioning in education in various parts of the country or even within the same textbooks.

30 Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1993); Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for "Indian" Pasts?', *Representation*, 37 (1992), 1–26; Gayatri C. Spivak, 'Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography', in *Subaltern Studies IV: Writings in South Asian History and Society*, ed. by Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University, 1985), pp. 338–363.

of all the historical manifestations of social dissatisfaction in Ukrainian lands that are repeated in these textbooks as evidence of the existence of a distinct Ukrainian identity as a consequence of the postcolonial imposition of the Western European template of nationalism and its product of the nation-state on the country's history. Yekelchyk rightly identifies the paradox of the "normalisation" of Ukraine's history in line with the Western model, pointing out its three manifestations. Firstly, the authors of textbooks demonstrate the country's "Europeanness" by arguing for the multicultural coexistence of Cossack Zaporizhzhia and Tatar Crimea. Secondly, the authors assure that Ukraine played the role of defender of Europe against threats "from the East". Thirdly, they introduce to nineteenth-century Ukrainian history Hroch's model of phases A, B and C in the development of nation-forming movements. Hroch assumed a gradual inclusion of the masses by the elites to participate in these movements, but the authors of these textbooks do not realise that his model conflicts with the traditional idea of Ukrainian historiography, whereby the people in Ukraine were always a bulwark of national identity, while the higher classes at times lost their national identity. Yekelchyk's hypothesis that these textbooks' narratives erase aspects of the past that are not associated with the nation is also confirmed by noting that the authors of the chapters on the revolutions of 1917–1921 avoid mentioning the class and internationalist aspects of these events.

In the introduction, Yekelchyk signposts the problem of how in a narrative about the history of Ukraine, on the one hand, to maintain the status of the nation as the main entity giving it meaning, and, on the other hand, to definitively remove the Soviet and neo-imperial influences and avoid the repetition of the traditional "national paradigm" created by the West in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I would argue that, in the end, the solution of introducing the perspective of postcolonial studies is justified convincingly. In the conclusion, the author summarises this hypothesis as follows: on the one hand, "in the Ukrainian case, the national paradigm played a progressive role as a tool for deconstructing the imperial version of their history" (p. 229); on the other hand, "[t]he quest for joining European historical narratives turned out to be a decolonization strategy that outgrew the constraints of geopolitics to reveal its potential for transnational and comparative history informed by Postcolonial Studies" (p. 230).[31]

Nonetheless, although my view of the transformations in Ukraine and the interpretive framework proposed for it resembles the author's,

[31] See also Barbara Törnquist-Plewa and Yuliya Yurchuk, 'Memory Politics in Contemporary Ukraine: Reflections from the Postcolonial Perspective', *Memory Studies*, 12 (2019), 699–720.

I must point out that certain aspects are not sufficiently acknowledged. Firstly, the author does not attach sufficient importance to the position in the public debate in Ukraine of a narrative that is anti-Soviet and anti-imperial and declaratively pro-European, but at the same time entirely, or at least predominantly, satisfies the criteria of a traditional "national paradigm". Secondly, the author fails to consider the fact that the collective emotions that began to grow in 2014 and reached a pinnacle after the invasion of 24 February 2022 and the actions that resulted from this involved a large section of Ukrainian society rejecting Russianness per se, not just in its Soviet and neo-imperial Putinist form. A starting point for my argument could be a simple result of quantitative research: in Yekelchyk's book, the name of Volodymyr Viatrovych does not appear a single time, even though, as director of the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory (UiNM) in 2014–2019, he held a significant part of the power to establish symbols of the past in the state, and he was a representative of the traditional "national paradigm" regarding twentieth-century history[32]. The term 'derussification', meanwhile – unlike decolonisation – features just once.

Yekelchyk correctly pinpoints to 2019 the beginning of the transition in the state memory politics from decommunisation towards decolonisation. He accurately identifies that historians in Ukraine started playing the role of activists from 2014. He also aptly gives to this phenomenon the term "Public History Reborn". These historians opposed the neoimperial interpretation of Eastern European history transmitted by the Kremlin and presented by Putin in its canonical version in a speech on 12 July 2021. According to this version, Ukrainians either do not exist or are presented – as in the Russian Empire until 1917 – as part of the 'triune' Russian nation, composed of Great, Little and White Russians. Finally, to exemplify this role of historians, Yekelchyk rightly emphasises the activities of the social organisation "Likbez. Historical Front"[33] and its publication of the "History Uncensored" series of books.

It is important to note, however, that this role also had an aspect symbolised by Viatrovych, who became director of the UiNM in 2014, having worked in the field of civil society organisations dealing with history and drawing support from, among others, the diaspora, specifically Український центр визвольного руху (UTsVR) in Lviv. The style in which he led the UiNM had previously been honed in the UTsVR, both by opposing the Russian neo-imperialist narrative and by unilaterally heroising the OUN and UPA, overlooking the crimes committed by their

32 Volodymyr Viatrovych, *The Gordian Knot: The Second Polish-Ukrainian War, 1942–1947* (Toronto: Horner Press, 2019).

33 For a critical dissection of this role, see Yuliya Yurchuk, 'Historians as Activists: History Writing in Times of War: The Case of Ukraine in 2014–2018', *Nationalities Papers*, 49 (2021), 691–709.

members against Jews, Poles and other minorities during the Second World War. We should also add that only Viatrovych's resignation as director – after Petro Poroshenko's defeat to Volodymyr Zelensky in the presidential elections – and his replacement by Anton Drobovych paved the way for Ukraine's politics of memory to move from decommunisation to decolonisation.

Yekelchyk does not omit in his book the question of the very limited representation in the Ukrainian public debate of the OUN and UPA as radical nationalist organisations which committed atrocities.[34] He writes that the Holocaust in Ukraine is most often treated today as the doing of the Third Reich, without addressing the participation of representatives of national society and while focusing on cases of individual help given to Jews. He also shows that references to the sources of ethnic cleansing of Poles in Volhynia in 1943–1944 fail to take into account the OUN's nationalistic ideology, concentrating purely on the objectives of the UPA's struggle for independence and the context – created by Nazi ad Soviet crimes – that allowed mass atrocities to be committed by both the Ukrainian and the Polish side of the conflict. Yet the author only tackles these questions when analysing the narratives of textbooks. He neither identifies the sources of society's reception of narratives that one-sidedly heroise the actors of events of the Second World War in Ukraine nor analyses the question of who spreads them and how.

I am not trying to suggest that Yekelchyk's book should include one more chapter about the politics of memory in Ukraine since 1991, in which he would show how some political actors presented the "dark sides" of the country's history in the twentieth century and why other actors did not present them at all. My point is that Yekelchyk's argument that Ukraine today is dominated by a social "horizon of expectation"[35] to which the best response is a narrative that is at once national, anti-Soviet, pro-European and anticolonial, is suspended, as it were, in a vacuum of knowledge about social beliefs, and particularly people's motivations for professing these convictions. Of course, the author does not manage to take into account in the book the results of surveys from the first months after Russia's invasion of 24 February 2022, which showed that that the overwhelming majority of Ukrainian society regarded the UPA and Stepan Bandera as national heroes. However, he might have been expected to consider the systematic increase of unequivocally positive evaluations of these symbols

34 For more on this subject, see Anna Wylegała, 'Managing the difficult past: Ukrainian collective memory and public debates on history', *Nationalities Papers*, 45 (2017), 780–97.

35 Reinhart Koselleck, '"Space of experience" and "horizon of expectation": two historical categories', in *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, ed. by Reinhart Koselleck (New York: Columbia University, 2004).

at least since 2014. In any case, the results of studies from 2014–2022[36] show that Ukrainian society is not prepared to gain full knowledge of the events that cast a shadow over the history of the independence movement in the 1930s and 1940s.

While again acknowledging the general suitability of the postcolonial studies framework for shaping the narrative about the history of Ukraine and analysing the contemporary historical discourses in the country, an important question cannot be avoided. In societies in which the belief that their members were the victims of colonialism has become entrenched, is there room to speak publicly also about the agency of the ancestors who committed atrocities and their descendants' responsibility for them? In other words, in view of the strengthening of the victim syndrome, will there be room in Ukraine to shake off yet another consequence of foreign rule, namely failure to take responsibility in the name of the nation for all the past events in which its representatives participated?

This question becomes topical as Ukraine's accession to the EU draws nearer. Yekelchyk's argument absolutely has a chance to play a role in the West by explaining why it is valid to interpret the history of Ukraine in colonial terms but its society's contemporary beliefs in postcolonial terms. However, it does not seem that Western public opinion – even if it is already convinced that this is an accurate interpretation – has begun to perceive Ukrainian history in the same way as it does that of postcolonial countries that once belonged to the overseas empires of European states. Can this public opinion consider acts of violence as manifestations of anticolonial retaliation by representatives of the oppressed if they were associated with the ideology of integral nationalism and the political stake of victory in the war of the Third Reich and resulted in mass atrocities? Although it is, of course, not Yekelchyk's intention for this to happen, I think that it is essential to also consider the possible consequences of Ukrainian society internalising the postcolonial narrative. This should be done not in order to argue that the EU should set sine qua non conditions concerning the historical narrative to candidate states or to sound the alarm regarding the supposed deluge of integral nationalism in the past decade, but to show that during this process Ukraine will face the prospect of assuming a critical approach towards part of its own past. Positions taken in such works as Himka's aforementioned book about the OUN and UPA's participation in the extermination of Jews or in such

36 Sociolohična hrupa Rejtynh, *Desjate zahal'nonacional'ne opytuvannja: Ideolobični markery vijny 27 kvitnja 2022* (Kyjiv: Sociolohična hrupa "REJTYNH", 2022), <https://ratinggroup.ua/files/ratinggroup/reg_files/rg_ua_1000_ideological_markers_ua_042022_press.pdf> [accessed: 10 March 2024].

voices in the debate as Hrytsak's arguments about the UPA from 2004[37] will then demand not only the support of voices both in Ukraine and in the diaspora but also understanding from public opinion in the country.

Before this prospect arrives, I think that it is ultimately necessary to combine the research on intellectual history and historiographical discourses conducted by Yekelchyk with wide research in Ukraine on social beliefs about the national past and values professed. Previous international and domestic projects have emphasised research on questions of identity, including such markers of identification as language or religion, as well as interpretation of the results in the light of differentiation of such social characteristics as age or region inhabited.[38] At the same time, there has been a lack of appreciation of the role of historical convictions and how they correspond to the state of professional knowledge on the past, as well as the links between these convictions and values. Nor has sufficient attention been given to the assimilation of images of the past derived from various kinds of sources, including those with mass reach. Such research would have to be wide-reaching and involve greater use of qualitative methods, as well as participation of researchers experienced in analysis of historiographical discourses. This would entail, among other things, the introduction to Ukraine of research on historical culture in a broad sense.[39] Such an expansion of the research horizon would, I suspect, help to bring together intellectual history with social history in Ukraine regarding the period since 1991 in a manner that has not yet been undertaken on a wide scale, either in the diaspora or domestically.

37 Jaroslav Hrycak, *Tezy do obhovorennja pro UPA*, *in Strasty za nacionalizmom. Istoryčni narysy*, ed. by Jaroslav Hrycak (Kyjiv: Krytyka), s. 90-114 (ed. originally: *Krytyka*, 7–8 [2004], 9–15).

38 E.g., *Regionalism Without Regions. Reconceptualizing Ukraine's Heterogeneity*, ed. by Ulrich Schmid and Oksana Myshlovska (Budapest–New York: CEU, 2019).

39 See the first attempt to apply German concepts of historical culture (mainly by Jörn Rüsen and Berndt Schönemann) to a comparative study of Poland and Ukraine: *The Politics of History in Poland and Ukraine: From Reconciliation to De-Conciliation*, ed. by Tomasz Stryjek and Joanna Konieczna-Sałamatin (London: Routledge, 2022).