

Ukraine's Many Faces: Land, People, and Culture Revisited. Edited by Olena Palko and Manuel Ferez Gil.

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Gary Marker

Department of History, Stony Brook University, Stony Brook, NY, United States; gary.marker@stonybrook.edu

This collection of documents, conversation pieces, scholarly essays, pedagogy, and political commentary regarding Ukraine's past and present, could not be more timely, indeed urgent! Inspired by the horrors brought on every day by Russia's brutal invasion of 2022, and before that the seizure of Crimea and much of Donbas in 2014, it constitutes a pointed and well-informed intervention into the present, past, and future of Ukraine. The volume functions simultaneously on many different levels, and it speaks to multiple—albeit intersecting—Anglophone audiences (colleagues, students, pundits, the general public), all the while accommodating a remarkably broad spectrum of opinions, all of which nevertheless coalesces around a single common agenda: the irreducible ontology of Ukraine as a large, sovereign, European nation.

How does one address all—or even most—of these elements, all of the geographic and cultural spaces and time periods that the volume addresses, in a single review, simultaneously academic and politically attentive? More acutely, in the midst of the current war, how can one possibly frame such a review: academically, pedagogically, politically, personally, all of the above? How does one keep one's own politics at least somewhat under wraps? Any one of these framings would be woefully insufficient in itself, especially under the fraught and disorienting circumstances that currently confront us. Conversely, any attempt to accommodate them all is likely impossible, and would assuredly test the endurance of even the most tolerant readers (not to mention the editors' patience). Rather than attempt an encyclopaedic discussion of each of the thirty-five contributions, I will seek instead to highlight some of the overarching themes, subjects, and approaches that connect the essays in one way or another.

The volume is organized into three large chronological sections: *Modernity at the Crossroads of Empire* (pp. 41–122); *“Ukrainian Selfhood in the Soviet Era”* (pp. 123–266); and *“Sovereignty Regained: Ukraine in the Post-Soviet Age* (pp. 267–364). These are preceded by a brief timeline of Ukrainian history and two introductory essays (“Where is Ukraine?” by Olesya Khromeychuk and “Ukraine’s Many Faces” by the volume’s two editors, Olena Palka and Manuel Ferez Gil. There is a brief concluding essay by John Vsetecka (“Integrating Scholarship on Ukraine into Classroom Syllabi”). This latter piece includes an extensive and briefly annotated bibliography of books and articles worth consulting, as well as online resources on Ukraine’s history.

Each of the core sections consists of three parts: 1) selected primary sources; 2) “conversation pieces”, which essentially involve Q and A’s between Ferez Gil and other scholars (primarily but not exclusively contributors to the volume); and finally and the essays themselves, which constitute the bulk of each section. Of necessity, the documents are highly selective, intended, I assume, to instantiate or underscore some of the points raised in the essays themselves. The conversational pieces constitute an unusual and engaging complement to the analytical pieces. They provide a reflective and often rather personal complement to the essays themselves, and I suspect that they will prove to be valuable to classroom discussions.

The editors have strategically chosen not to make explicit connections across the three parts, or between the individual essays, thereby resisting the temptation to be overly prescriptive and instead leaving it to the readers to develop the connections on their own. Even though the volume’s primary agendas are crystal clear, this approach prudently allows space or agency for the readers themselves to draw their own inferences. I mostly agree with this hands-off strategy, although it might be useful to connect the conversations to the documents and analytical documents that follow, especially for classrooms in which—as the contributors frankly concede—neither teacher nor student is likely to have a substantial familiarity with Ukrainian and its long and variegated history. Perhaps this could be accomplished by adding some discussion points within the sections themselves.

Who, then, are the intended readers? In principle of course, all English speakers, and several papers note that prior to 2014 Ukraine was, even for relatively well-informed westerners, largely *terra incognita*, and this volume seeks to fill that vacuum (or begin to) with informed discussion. Still, above all, the editors speak directly to scholars, university instructors and their students. Much of the volume’s brief is pointedly directed to Russianists, historians, literary specialists, social scientists and latter-day pundits. To each of these constituencies all of the book’s authors have stressed some irreducible, fundamental premises: Ukraine is a sovereign nation, with a distinct, lengthy, and complicated history. It can no longer be studied or imagined,

as it has often been, as an appendage to or epiphenomenon of Russia and Russian history, but rather as a distinct place, history, and culture. The events of 2014 and then the full-fledged 2022 invasion of Ukraine has most assuredly sent shock waves throughout our field (i.e., the whole expanse of Eurasian studies), a *cri du coeur* if you will, that has generated demands to ‘decolonize’ how we as scholars approach this very large and critically important part of the world. This criticism of the discipline is especially timely and unavoidably painful, and we will see how it plays out over the next several years. In its manifesto, that scholars think of Ukraine’s history as something separate and distinct from being a mere subset of Russian imperial history, this collection actively contributes to this discussion.

The dominant and interwoven thematic triad of “Ukraine qua Ukraine”, “Ukraine and Russia”, “Ukraine and the West” infuses virtually every essay. The first two are particularly prominent: the importance of detailing to anglophone readers the definitive point that Ukraine has a distinct, complicated, multi-faceted and multi-peopled history of its own (the “many faces” of the book’s title), and in particular the imperative of reducing Ukraine’s history and identities to a mere subset of Russia. But the west also constitutes a prominent theme, both the place of the west in the Ukrainian imagination, past and present as well as the place (or non-place) of Ukraine in the western imagination, which emerges as largely a myopic and ill-informed gaze.

Embedded in all these streams are the complexities of geopolitics that have beset post-Soviet Ukraine since 1991, and that have become urgent crises since 2014, in the wake of Russia’s many assaults. All of the essays explicitly situate Ukraine within Europe and European history, albeit in differing and even conflicting ways. Some see ‘Europe’ as Ukraine’s natural or preferred home, a democratic space, within whose spatial and historical midst Ukraine would gain a higher degree of security and fellowship (via the EU and NATO) with democratic cosmopolitanism. Others, though, while endorsing Europe as a source of security and cultural belonging, are far more conditional in their embrace of European-ness.

Beginning with Khromeychuk’s forward, for example, whose subtitle, “How a Western Outlook Perpetuates Myths about Europe’s Largest Country,” expresses succinctly the critique of the Western imagination of Ukraine. Some of the book’s authors point out the patronizing, and at times proto-colonial outlooks that were virtually ubiquitous among western political leaders and pundits after 1991: the triumphalism of the victors, a view that for a brief period was mostly embraced by democratically inclined elites in most of Eastern Europe. Well, no longer. the world of 2024 is a very different place, and the disenchantment with this big brother/little-brother-ism felt to one extent or another everywhere in the region, is further elucidated and sharply deconstructed in the essay “The Art of Misunderstanding” by Kateryna Batanova.

One great strength of the collection is the determination of its contributors to problematize their subjects, and the willingness of the editors to accommodate a diversity of opinions regarding the history and present internal state of Ukraine. True, the authors do not explicitly address each other. Nonetheless, readers can see that there is quite a range of views, and at least as I read the essays significant disagreements. There are no wide-eyed optimists here so far as I can discern, but there is no shortage of measured, at least regarding the internal evolution of state and society. Some of the authors do come across as pessimistic about the short term, mostly about possible scenarios for ending the war (see, for example, the conversation between David Marples and Gil), and the volume as a whole does not shy away from acknowledging ongoing problems of corruption (pervasive, but especially so under Yanukovich), the relative frailty of the state apparatus, the lingering—if seemingly diminished—presence of assertive ethno-nationalism that was characteristic of the Yushenko presidency. But the pessimism, when acknowledged, steers well clear of doom-and-gloom fatalism.

Another strength is the multiplicity of subjects addressed. As one would expect, landmarks of Ukraine's past and present (the Khmelnytsky era, Holodomor, Collectivization, Euromaidan, etc.) are highlighted. The fact of having been parts of competing empires over several centuries is a focus of several authors discussed (Ewa Thompson, Oleksii Sokyрко, Fabian Baumann, Olena Palko), as is the impact of that legacy on twenty-first century Ukraine. But so too are other subjects. These include gender (Tamara Martsenyuk's hard-edged essay is particularly pointed in this regard); the evolving relationship between primary language (primarily among Ukraine's Russian speakers) on one hand and national identity on the other (Volodymyr Kulyk's review of contemporary survey data essay is quite systematic and enlightening); regionalism, ethnicity, and religion. Indeed, to one degree or another nearly every author mentions the ethnic and confessional heterogeneity that has characterized the peopling of Ukraine since... well, the founding of Kyiv, and, in the eyes of several authors, this diversity remains a defining characteristic of the nation. I heartily agree. Several papers give significant attention to Greek Catholics (Buiskykh), Jews (Moskalets), Poles, Tatars (Kisly), and other non-Orthodox, non-East Slavic peoples, while others explore the familiar East/West divide, Crimea, and other territorially-defined peoples. This is an essential narrative moving forward, and, frankly, I would have liked to see more such discussions.

Before concluding let me offer a couple of suggestions, both technical and substantive, in the hope that the collection not only *reaches* the broad audience it urgently deserves, but *moves* them to engage what is written, deeply, soberly, and reflectively.

First the technical: the book exists both as an open access e-book (the version I read), and in hard copy. I am guessing that the editors felt an urgency to make

the volume available as quickly as possible, and under the current circumstances that makes complete sense. Nevertheless, moving forward it would be important to have the entire text carefully re-copyedited. There are numerous misspellings, typographical errors, and other technical infelicities throughout the volume, and for subsequent printings, these should be corrected.

Both the notes and the bibliography offer very extensive and helpful guidance to readers wishing to pursue some of these topics further. Given that the collection is directed first and foremost to the university classroom it would, I think, be valuable to pose some topics or questions for discussion at key moments in the text, including an effort to connect the more distant past to the contemporary discourse on Ukrainian nationhood. It would also diminish the risk of inadvertently turning the chronological organization into a teleological one.

If I have one gripe about the book's framework, it is the abbreviated discussions of the earliest centuries of Ukrainian history, Kyivan Rus', the emergence of self-conscious identities even while existing under multiple and separate empires, the emergence and evolution of the Hetmanates, the notions of "rights and freedoms of the Cossacks", etc. All of these are mentioned, but never really developed. If for no other reason than that they have long occupied—and continue to occupy—an enduring place within the Ukrainian national imagination, they deserve more attention. Similarly, the early modern period, although granted a section of its own ("Modernity at the Crossroads of Empire", pp. 41–72), spanning the mid-seventeenth century through the early decades of the nineteenth century) is to my mind somewhat underdeveloped, and not sufficiently integrated into the longer larger sections that follow. Of course, there is only so much space—even virtually—available, and it is entirely appropriate to allot most of that space to modernity, and perhaps the fact that I myself am an early modernist is reflected here. Nevertheless, the initial section constitutes a fundamental empirical and explanatory foundation for what comes after, and I think the volume would be strengthened and clarified by giving it more attention. This is especially true for the period spanning from the Hetmanate of Bohdan Khmel'nyts'kiy through those of Ivan Mazepa and Pylyp Orlyk, a time period upon which so many subsequent arguments regarding the ideas of sovereignty, ethnicity, statehood, and identity are constructed. I would add to this mix the place of Petro Mohyla and the enormous impact of the Kyivan Academy on the spiritual life of East Slavic Orthodoxy during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Finally, it would be valuable to expand the discussion of the place of Volodymyr Zelenskyy and his administration in the life of Ukraine, in particular the increasing expression of a Ukrainian national identity irrespective of language, ethnicity, west and east, or religion, and the apparent decline of specific regional affiliations

in Ukraine's identity politics. This constitutes a remarkable development, and many readers, I suspect, would like to know more about his persona and his role in effectuating this very positive evolution.

Quibbles aside, the volume is impressive, timely beyond words, rigorous, and enormously informative. May it have a large and devoted readership. And may Ukraine have peace, freedom, and democracy.

