

A Laboratory of Transnational History (Review)

by Johanna Granville

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How do you write a history of a country that for centuries was split into several empires, lacked both an uninterrupted tradition of statehood and an established high culture with a standardized language, was inhabited by several ethnic groups, the dominant one - the "little Russians" or "Ruthenians" - being mostly illiterate peasants concentrated in rural areas who left no written records for wide swaths of time and lacked any national consciousness until World War I? How does one write about the history of these people who, even when they became literate, were forbidden to publish literature in Ukrainian (within the Russian Empire), and when Ukrainian history did not even exist as a field of study in universities? The answer, according to an international consortium of historians, is to write "transnational history," which they generally define as the study of relations between cultures and societies, focusing on "agents of cultural exchange" (pp. 3, 86). The purpose of this book, *A Laboratory of Transnational History*, edited by Georgiy Kasianov (Institute of Ukrainian History of Ukrainian Academy of Sciences, Kiev) and Philipp Ther (European University Institute, Florence), is to contemplate alternative, more accurate, ways of interpreting Ukrainian history, eschewing "linear and *longue durée* causal explanations, as well as teleology," and "speculating freely about conjunctures and contingencies, disruptions, and episodes of 'lack of history' " (p. 2). The book is divided into two sections. The first, entitled "National versus Transnational History" contains four essays by Kasianov, Ther, Mark von Hagen, and Andreas Kappeler. The second section, "Ukrainian History Rewritten,"

consists of six essays by Natalia Yakovenko, Oleksiy Tolochko, John-Paul Himka, Yaroslav Hrytsak, Roman Szporluk, Alexei Miller, and Oksana Ostapchuk. The essays in the first section fit together well. In the first essay, Kasianov establishes the basic principles of nationalized Ukrainian history, which he explains evolved in two stages. The first began in the mid-nineteenth century, culminating in Mykhailo Hrushevsky's *History of Ukraine-Rus'*. Although supplanted by the Soviet paradigm of Ukrainian history, which denied autonomy to events in so-called "southern Russia," the Hrushchevsky version was further nurtured by the Western diaspora and popularized by books such as Orest Subtelny's *Ukraine: A History* and Paul Robert Magocsi's *A History of Ukraine* (p. 39). The second stage, which began in the late 1980s, continues to the present under state sponsorship. As Kasianov points out, this traditional, nationalized history is both ethnocentric and teleological. Characterized by a tendency to "sovereignize" national history, it generally "ignores the presence of other ethnoses or nations in what was actually a common space and time" (p. 17). In his essay, Kappeler explains that recent historical surveys "combine the history of the Ukrainian people with that of the present day territory of the Ukrainian state" (p. 59). Moreover, the premise of many Ukrainian historical studies written today is that "the Ukrainian nation and state arose naturally and were 'objectively determined' or programmed" (pp. 16-17). Centering mainly on Stalin's crimes and national traumas, the national paradigm exaggerates Ukrainian victimhood and lionizes individuals and groups like Bohdan Khmelnytsky, Ivan Mazepa, Stepan Bandera, Symon Petliura, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), and Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) (pp. 7, 9). The implicit equation of the famine of 1932-3 ("Holodomor") with the Holocaust is a key element in Ukrainian national martyrology (pp. 9, 59).

To some extent, every country needs a nationalized history much like an individual person needs a *raison d'être* or positive self-image to survive. As several authors mention, the major European states went through this stage of "nationalization" back in the nineteenth century. As Roman Szporluk points out, many observers predicted that Ukraine would split up after 1991 the way Yugoslavia had (p. 272). Thus, the construction of a Ukrainian past, the invention of a national tradition, was "one of the main elements of Ukrainian nation-building" and legitimization, Kappeler acknowledges (p. 56). Hrytsak goes still further, opining that Ukrainian historians cling to the national paradigm for fear the "nation-building project may fail" (p. 237). Since Ukrainian history was not even a field of study in universities for several decades, historians are now "taking up the missed opportunity" to "deconstruct Soviet myths," Hrytsak and Kappeler note (pp. 237, 58). Indeed, according to Ther, nationalized history is both easier to write than transnational history and attracts more media attention (p. 84).

The essays in the second section are more diverse. Yakovlenko believes names for Ukraine were debated as early as the sixteenth century. Miller's and Ostapchuk's essay focuses on the Latin and Cyrillic alphabets in Ukrainian discourse. Tolochko calls for the study of anthropological processes, such as Ukrainian pilgrimages and the networking of the Ukrainian gentry (*szlachta*) to describe the space that was Ukraine in the early nineteenth century. Hrytsak shows how traditional theories of nationalism do not always apply to contemporary Ukraine. Szporluk provides a historical overview of the evolution of Ukraine's disparate regions as once part of other empires. Himka's essay in the second section of the book lucidly illustrates the hyperbolized martyrology currently in vogue. He pinpoints the ways in which the documentary film, "Between Hitler and Stalin: Ukraine in World War II--The Untold Story," takes "rhetorical and

visual liberties" to intensify the sense of Ukrainian victimhood during World War II. While the film proudly claims that "seven million Ukrainians fought against Hitler in the Red Army," it omits to note that the same Ukrainians helped to implement the Red Army's "scorched-earth policy and even participated in the NKVD's massacres" (p. 220). Monks, shown forcibly disrobed, actually represented the Russian Patriarchal Church, not - as the viewer is led to believe - the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, which was hostile to monks (p. 215). While the film points out that Ukrainians were also killed at famous sites of the Jewish Holocaust like Babyn Yar, it attempts to "assimilate non-Ukrainians" to various Ukrainian body counts. Katyn Forest, for example, is mentioned, although documents of the Soviet Ministry of Internal Affairs confirm that 97 percent of the victims there were Poles (p. 218). The narrator informs viewers that during the Soviet occupation of western Ukraine in 1939-1941, ten thousand people were executed and over half a million were deported to Siberia. The viewer is led to believe that these victims were all Ukrainians, but in fact most of them were Poles (p. 217). The film also omits to mention the anti-Semitic views of many Ukrainians and glosses over the issue of Ukrainian collaboration with the Nazis. Symon Petliura is only praised for leading the struggle for independence after the Bolshevik Revolution; viewers do not hear about the anti-Jewish pogroms committed by his troops (p. 219). Likewise, the film describes the UPA's battles against the Germans and Russians, but ignores its massacre of Polish citizens in Volhynia (p. 219).

Himka decries "blood-soaked heritages" that obstruct a realistic examination of the past. Ukraine's uniqueness and the rapid globalization of the twenty-first century make this type of nationalized "us versus them" history anachronistic. A new group of "modernist" historians have begun to seek ways of transcending the linear, narrowly ethnic and teleological model of Ukrainian history (p. 4). As Miller and Ostapchuk

observe, the location of Ukraine (meaning "borderland") at the "junction of two civilizational and cultural/linguistic areas --Slavia Latina, and Slavia Orthodoxa-- determined the fundamentally 'open' character of Ukrainian culture as a whole" (p. 170). Because it was ruled for such a long time by empires and states populated by more educated and articulate Poles, Russians, Jews, and Austrians, Ukraine's history cannot be written within a national framework. The country is composed of distinct regions with very different histories (e.g. Galicia, Trans-Carpathian Ukraine, Bukovina). Likewise, Kappeler argues, the many "competing or even exclusive national narratives" and collective memories pertaining to the history of Ukraine need to be reconciled. For example, while Ukrainians view Bohdan Khmelnytsky (Hetman of the Zaporozhian Host) as a hero for liberating them from the rule of the Polish Catholic nobility, Poles see him and the Cossak revolt he led (1648–1654) as the annihilator of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Meanwhile, East European Jews construe him as the perpetrator of their first great persecution (p. 52).

In short, *A Laboratory of Transnational History* is a welcome contribution to the literature on Ukrainian historiography and to the debate about modernity versus tradition. As Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger argued in *The Invention of Tradition* (1983), traditions are not always inherited intact from the past, but instead created in the present. Other discerning monographs include David Marples's *Heroes and Villains: Creating National History in Contemporary Ukraine* (2008); Serhii Plokhy's *Unmaking Imperial Russia: Mykhailo Hrushevsky and the Writing of Ukrainian History* (2005); and Stephen Velychenko's *National History as Cultural Process* (1992). Nevertheless, every book has its flaws. This book sorely lacks a conclusion to compare and tie together the ten disparate essays. Despite its shortcomings, however, this would be an excellent book

to assign in university courses to encourage students to question what they read in standard texts on Ukrainian history.

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