

**AWAY WITH RUSSIAN GLASSES –
SEE THE UKRAINIAN DREAM**

Book Review: *Living the Independence Dream: Ukraine and Ukrainians in Contemporary Socio-Political Context.* / Ed. by Lada Kolomiyets. Dartmouth College, Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv. Illustrations. Index. Vernon Press. 2024. xiii, 351 p. (ISBN: 9781648898617)

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Анотація. Abstract. The collective work *Living the Independence Dream: Ukraine and Ukrainians in Contemporary Socio-Political Context* is analyzed through a postcolonial approach, emphasizing the need for monographs that represent Ukrainians in the world not through the mediation of established clichés and stereotypes created in the 19th–21st centuries, but through the disclosure of their own experiences in their own language.

The review emphasizes that the monograph includes works by Ukrainian and foreign scholars who, based on written and visual sources, historical and literary narratives, views and values prevalent in society and formed in different eras, show the peculiarities of Ukrainian society, in particular, the differences between Ukrainians and Russians, refuting the claims of “brotherly peoples” or “one people” used by Russia in its war against Ukraine. Therefore, this book is an important element in deepening and broadening the understanding of Ukraine in general and its anti-colonial struggle in particular. This is an opportunity to look at Ukraine and Ukrainians not through muddy Russian glasses, but with a decolonizing lens.

Keywords: postcolonial approach, historical narrative, decommunication, decolonization, national identity, multidimensional perspective.

I. THE POSTCOLONIAL OPTICS

For more than half a century, European and North American historians, philosophers, literary critics, political analysts, and cultural anthropologists have investigated both the dynamics between empires and their colonies and the violent mechanisms through which traditional cultural practices were destroyed or marginalized. The reassessment of internal biases and epistemic injustices served both as a catalyst for exploring the cultural heritage of colonized peoples and as an inspiration for transformative social and cultural change.

LIVING THE INDEPENDENCE DREAM

UKRAINE AND UKRAINIANS IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT

Edited by
Lada Kolomiyets



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SERIES IN SOCIAL EQUALITY AND JUSTICE

However, European and American scholars were mostly focused on analyzing their own colonial practices. Until the start of Russian aggression in 2022, they did not perceive (and some to this day do not perceive) the USSR as an empire. Thus, they fail to understand that Russia's violence and contempt for its former colonies are the source of its current aggression. Countless scholars across the academia have examined the USSR, Russia, and the states that regained independence after the fall of the "Evil Empire". Yet instead of clear answers, many found themselves confronted by the pervasive notion of the "Russian World". Thus, Ukraine — perhaps the most vivid example of Soviet colonial domination — remains marginalized in academic discourse, dismissed on the grounds that the term "postcolonial" cannot be used for the Russian/Soviet imperial realm. Maria Mälksoo noted the reason for this:

Most postcolonial research is focused on the political construction of racial hierarchies according to skin color, not hierarchies among white people themselves. The question about the postcoloniality of former Russian imperial subjects, as well as post-communist subjects in the former Soviet republics and in the near-abroad of the Soviet empire, remains a complex one that is much-debated in the scholarship (Mälksoo, 2022, p. 473).

These scholars construed Ukrainians' rejection of Communist ideology as ethnonationalism grounded in outdated nineteenth-century historiography and portrayed it as harmful to human rights. Meanwhile, they overlooked the dangers of Russian nationalism and colonialism, relying on contemporary Russian historiography¹ to analyze Ukraine's already Soviet-distorted past, or on works by Western pro-Russian Sovietologists² or pro-Russian Ukrainian scholars who set out to wage battle with "nationalist distortions" of Ukraine's history³.

1 Aleksei Miller. *The Ukrainian Question: The Russian Empire and Nationalism in the Nineteenth Century*. Budapest and New York: Central European University Press (2003); Alexey Miller's interview "Clashing Memory 'Cultures' in Russia and Europe", *Ponars Eurasia* (2018), <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/clashing-memory-cultures-in-russia-and-europe-an-interview-with-aleksey-miller>.

2 Richard Sakwa. *Russia Against the West: The Post-Cold War Crisis of World Order*. Cambridge University Press (2017).

3 Georgiy Kasianov. *Na raskhodiashchikhsia kursakh. Istoricheskiye labirinty Ukrainy i Rossii, Rossia v globalnoi politike*. Moskva. (2018). Vol. 16: 82–95; Georgiy Kasianov. *Ukraina i sosedi: istoricheskaya politika 1987–2018*. Moskva (2019).

After decades in which Ukrainian agency was sidelined and local perspectives were overshadowed by dismissive colonial readings, there is now growing recognition — both publicly and within academia — of the need to decommunize and decolonize Ukraine's historical narrative and cultural heritage.

Thus, the need for the kind of monographs, which represent Ukrainians in the world not through the mediation of established clichés and stereotypes created in the 19th–21st centuries, but through the disclosure of their own experience in their own language, has long been felt. The absence of such books indicates not only rare attempts by Ukrainian scholars to present their views to the world, but also the ignoring of these views caused by epistemic imperialism regarding Ukrainian expertise and

the imposing of Western-dominating and Russo-centric perspectives on the Russian invasion of Ukraine in ways that commonly ignore or erase Ukrainian perspectives and agency (Hendl, Burlyuk, O'Sullivan, & Arystanbek, 2023, p. 173).

The monograph *Living the Independence Dream: Ukraine and Ukrainians in Contemporary Socio-Political Context* based on written and visual sources, historical and literary narratives, attitudes and values widespread in society and developed in different eras, shows the specifics of Ukrainian society, in particular, the difference between Ukrainians and Russians, refuting the claims of "brotherly peoples" or "one people" propagated by the Russian regime for the purpose of the war. It's crucial because the Russian information warfare against Ukraine and other European nations has been developing since the mid-2000s. And the topic of the Second World War, which functions in Russian discourse as the "Great Patriotic War", is one of the current war's key instruments. Starting in 2014, the theme of a battle with Ukrainian "fascists and Nazis" has been one of the main explanations for the attack on Ukraine. Since 2022, the number of information and sabotage campaigns organized by Russians has increased significantly (Horbyk, Prymachenko, & Orlova, 2023, p. 6; Seth G. Jones, 2025, p. 9–10).

The regaining of Ukraine's independence in 1991 revealed numerous problems accumulated in society as a result of being under the pressure of the

Russian imperial and communist totalitarian regime and the dominance of the narratives they created. After all, the filling of the Ukrainian space with Soviet concepts, which were embodied in political and cultural practices, economic instruments, and *lieux de mémoire*, included the reproduction of concepts of Russian imperial ideology that did not contradict the communist doctrine, but rather combined with it and strengthened its anti-Ukrainian potential. Regarding Russia's past and present wars against Ukraine, as well as Russian interpretations of these wars, we can use the statement of Andriy Tyushka:

a clash of (factual and fictional) narratives in both media, politics, and academia, a good share of which (un)intentionally contributes to the distortion, rather than production, of knowledge. (Tyushka, 2025, p. 643).

II. MULTIDIMENSIONAL APPROACH

Collective volume *Living the Independence Dream. Ukraine and Ukrainians in Contemporary Socio-Political Context* helps to deconstruct elements of distorted knowledge. It's also clarified many complex topics where Ukraine's history is entangled with current events and plans for the future. This contrasts with the numerous publications presenting distorted views of Ukraine's history and culture that Russia has been spreading around the world for years.

This book is an example of the joint work of scholars from Ukraine, USA and Croatia who practice different methodological approaches based on their professional experience and knowledge of various academia disciplines and ways of life. These differences have ensured that *Living the Independence Dream*

takes a multidimensional look at the period of regained independence as a time of advancement towards the realization of collective dreams shaping the post-Soviet nation, even though everyday disappointments, anxiety, and uncertainty (Kolomiyets, 2024, VII).

In order to gain a multidimensional perspective of this period, the book includes research of the historical, cultural, linguistic, political, and economic features of Ukrainian history since 1991. The book

consists of three main parts: *Historical Narratives, Language, and Cultural Policy; Philosophy, Popular Culture, Literature; Memoirs and Reflections*, as well as an additional — forth part *Photo Gallery* which contains the first publication of illustrative photos dedicated to important political and cultural events in the life of the Ukrainian diaspora. The authors had planned to publish the book in 2022; however, the large-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine delayed publication and prompted them to supplement their previous work.

The collective volume was conceived and planned to be published as a kind of summary of the three decades of independence, with the aim of analyzing various aspects of the socio-cultural transformation of society in postcolonial realities. As Lada Kolomiyets explains in the *Foreword*, the idea behind this monograph was

to create an insightful perspective of the thirty-plus independence period in contemporary Ukrainian history (Kolomiyets, 2024, VII).

The book shows how the consciousness of the modern Ukrainian nation has been shaped over the past three decades, and what features of the Ukrainian character are deeply rooted in its cultural heritage. The role of media, literature, and art in the creation of new messages, meanings, and narratives during the decades of independence is meticulously described by the authors.

The main idea of Antonina Berezovenko's contribution *Making the Future — Remaking the Past: Historical Narrative in State-Building Process in Today's Ukraine* is to analyze various primary and interpretive historical sources and to show how the narrative has changed after the USSR downfall. This helps to trace the immanent democratic liberal qualities of the Ukrainian historical narrative. Works by Ukrainian authors are democratic in nature, and the desire for equality is one of the key features of their identity. Berezovenko shows essential features of the Ukrainian national narrative and how this narrative builds a certain, democratic model of world perception. Naturally, anti-colonial attitudes have influenced

the components of the Ukrainian historical narrative that crystallized after Ukraine's independence in the context of its liberation from

the influence of historical Soviet/Russian schemes that receive equal attention (Berezovenko, 2024, p. 3).

In her analysis, Berezovenko uses the decolonizing optic, which helps to describe the perception of “past — present — future of Ukraine through the eyes of its ‘own’ and ‘alien’ narrators” (Berezovenko, 2024, p. 5). This optic is worth implementing in American and Western European historical scholarship, since in their discourse “practically all Slavic histories, not only Ukrainian, appeared as ‘small supplements’ to the ‘real Russian history’” (Berezovenko, 2024, p. 9). The author shows: since 1991 Ukrainians have gradually realized that, like any other imperial entity, Russia is violating the political, cultural, and linguistic rights of Ukrainians. Although Russia imposes colonial narratives that cannot be quickly and easily abandoned,

Ukrainian society [...] is rapidly maturing. It is freeing itself from the rudiments of the consequences of colonization naïve sentiments about the “good neighboring with Russia”, complexes of national inferiority (Berezovenko, 2024, p. 45).

Bohdan A. Futey’s chapter entitled *Holodomor — Genocide, War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity* highlighted war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide committed in Ukraine by Russia. The chapter examines the evolution of the term “genocide” and contains not only an analysis of the crime of genocide (the Holodomor of Ukrainians organized by the Russian communist regime), but also many contemporary documents of the international law regarding Russian war against Ukraine. The process of objectification of the crime of famine genocide in the system of international law, its criminalization, and the functioning of legal safeguards for the commission of similar crimes is also considered in the chapter. The author emphasized that

scholars are calling the ghoulish bloodshed all over Ukraine as well as acts such as the russification of kidnapped Ukrainian children genocide. Genocide against Ukrainians must be stopped (Futey, 2024, p. 64).

Futey’s text shows an obvious connection between the lies about the Holodomor and the ban

on remembrance its victims if we compare the mass crimes of the communist regime with Russia’s modern genocidal rhetoric and practices, including the abduction of children from the occupied territories of Ukraine.

The chapter *The Influence of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church on Shaping Ukrainian National Identity* by Domagoj Krpan explores the complexity of the formation of Ukrainian national identity through the prism of religious practices in the Soviet period due to the dominance of Moscow Orthodoxy in the eastern part of Soviet Ukraine and the influence of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, although banned under the USSR, in the western part. Throughout history, Moscow’s political violence in church matters has been aimed at reducing the influence of Ukrainian identity and curtailing the rights of Ukrainian Greek Catholics during the Soviet era. The author shows how the Soviet regime created and deepened the main contradictions between them, and how these contradictions still affect religious life in independent Ukraine. He concludes:

Greek Catholic Church [...] does not have a historical connection with Russia or some deeper brotherhood spiritual connections through Orthodoxy. All this led to virtually nonexistent support for having any connection with Russia (Krpan, 2024, p. 84).

Natalia Kudriavtseva in the chapter *Between ‘Ideal’ and ‘Living’ Language: Ideologies of the Ukrainian Language Revival in Independent Ukraine* analyzes the slow and sometimes painful transformation of attitudes toward the Ukrainian language: its use in official documents, education, cultural practices, and private communication over the past 30 years. The author emphasized that during Soviet time

portrayed as a backward, provincial language, Ukrainian was opposed to the advanced language of Russian which was seen as a key to upward social mobility and success (Kudriavtseva, 2024, p. 89).

Kudriavtseva describes the evolution of views regarding the Ukrainian language since Ukraine gained independence in 1991, and tendencies after 2013–2014 Euromaidan when

Ukrainian was perceived as shaping national identity, patriotism, and pro-Western political orientation while Russian was regarded as inculcating authoritarianism, the *russskiy mir* and retrograde social views (Kudriavtseva, 2024, p. 95).

She observes the resurgence of interest in the Ukrainian language and shows the 'newspeaker/bottomup' kind of revitalization as well as

the ideological shift from the conception of a 'pure and beautiful' language to the view of a 'living language which changes and has a right to change' (Kudriavtseva, 2024, p. 104).

Kudriavtseva argues that one of the main features is that the Ukrainian language is valued as a marker of identity, which can be seen in the significant shift from Russian to Ukrainian after the Russian aggression in 2014, and especially as result of invasion in 2022.

The first part of collective volume concludes with Ostap Kushnir's chapter *Thirty Years of Political Orders in Ukraine: Constructing the Nation of Decentralized Communities* which shows the way political orders were established in Ukraine. The author

strongly contends that Ukraine as a country should be perceived, explained, and researched through the prism of decentralized communities, be they ethnic, political, or civic (Kushnir, 2024, p. 112).

He argues that Ukraine has often been viewed as a territory of diverse and inventive interactions between different states — various European and Asian traditions, which is reflected in the historical Cossack traditions of state-building. Kushnir emphasized how the Cossack traditions of self-organization, self-government, and defense are manifested in today's perception in Ukraine.

The second part of monograph *Philosophy, Popular Culture, Literature* opens with chapter *Happiness as a Value or Why are Ukrainians (Un)happy?* written by Olga Gomilko who explains happiness as a value in the context of Ukraine's postcolonial experience and implies that happiness and freedom are interconnected for Ukrainians. Author uses philosophical and cultural comparative analysis to figure out the tension between

the postcolonial implications of Ukrainian happiness and national aspiration for freedom. Gomilko argues that

values of democracy and freedom activated happiness in Ukrainians" despite of a desire of "a deliberate Russian neocolonial policy to kill their freedom loving spirit" (Gomilko, 2024, p. 134).

In her chapter *A People's Cyber War: Ukraine's Digital Folklore and Popular Mobilization* Lada Kolomiyets scrutinizes Ukrainian digital folklore, verbal and visual arts as a reaction to the Kremlin propaganda since aggression in 2014. The author describes Ukrainians' self-mobilization, linguistic and artistic resistance in the cyberspace to the Russian information warfare, using verses, jokes, memes, caricatures, art posters. Kolomiyets shows different types of wartime poetry, poetic mystifications, and humorous verses, as well as parodistic translation, and onomastic vocabulary-based euphemisms of the Russo-Ukrainian war. The author analyses the anticolonial features of such creativities by emphasizing:

Today's popular Ukrainian cyberculture is the culture of a postcolonial political nation fighting for its existence here and now, every moment, and in this struggle, is creating its non-Russian, new and distinct identity (Kolomiyets, 2024, p. 152).

Kolomiyets describes how modern Ukrainian wartime culture intertwined with popular (mass) culture, and allows people from different socio-cultural circles to be widely involved in it:

The basis of Ukrainian mobilization pop culture is folklore [...], with its grassroots laughter and spontaneous reactions of people to the social and political events of our time (Kolomiyets, 2024, p. 187).

It is worth noting that Kolomiyets's analysis "develops a draft of the new theory of contemporary Ukrainian culture, which is being formed during the Russo-Ukrainian war as the post-post-Soviet popular culture" (Kolomiyets, 2024, p. 187) that can be used for a broader study of the creativity of Ukraine's anti-colonial potential.

In the third chapter of this part *To Reach Paradise,*

Maturing in Purgatory is Necessary (From Hell and Purgatory to Paradise: Literary Reflections by Dante, Valerii Shevchuk, and Sofii Maidanska on their Countries' Paths to Independence), written by Larissa Zaleska Onyshkevych, the idea of national Paradise and its prerequisites — personal identity and values has been described. The author analyzes the works of two famous Ukrainian writers — Valerii Shevchuk and Sofii Maidanska, who's creative and everyday life experience was influenced by Soviet colonialism, which helps them to describe in detail how “victims pass the Communist Hell and reach Purgatory where they gain wisdom of themselves and the world” (Zaleska Onyshkevych, 2024, p. 195).

III. ACADEMY AND MEMORY INTERTWINED

The third part of book *Memoirs and Reflections* presents three chapters with personal reflections. The first *A Participating Witness to Modern Ukraine: Martha Bohachevsky Chomiak* written by Martha Bohachevsky Chomiak highlighted the personal life and work experience from 1959 to 1988. The author reflected them within the historical context of the relationship between the Ukrainian-American diaspora and Soviet Ukraine:

The Soviet totalitarian government, overlaid with imagined Russian imperial grandeur, made accepted modes of cultural interaction impossible for almost all Ukrainians abroad. (Those who had contacts were either linked to or used by the Soviet regime) (Bohachevsky Chomiak, 2024, p. 218).

Bohachevsky Chomiak also stated several important characteristics of Soviet Ukraine cultural life: “Ukraine’s authentic voice was muted, and often warped” (Bohachevsky Chomiak, 2024, p. 223).

In Yuri Shapoval chapter *War and the Historian: Subjective Notes* the horror of contemporary Russian occupation is described and includes

both a professional analysis of current events and the subjective feelings of an individual immersed in their course (Shapoval, 2024, p. 231).

Shapoval reveals the Russia’s imperial ambitions and mental war against West, not only against Ukraine.

The author shows the multilevel confrontation with different countries, and shows that “propaganda, one of the pillars on which modern Russian imperialism rests” (Shapoval, 2024, p. 233) uses a wide arsenal of digital tools and technologies. Shapoval problematizes the image of Russian soldier as “liberator” by recalling the looting and unmotivated violence against the civilian population during Soviet time, and calling the Russian military “a rapist, an executioner, an extortionist, a thief, a liar, and an insidious villain” (Shapoval, 2024, p. 237).

He proposes personal reflections and professional explanation on important topics such as: Russia’s current war against Ukraine and World War II, and How does history as a discipline influence understanding of this war?

The chapter *The Way We Were: The Semiotics of a Ukrainian Diaspora Experience* by Myroslava Tomorug Znayenko describes intertwining of personal experience and professional challenges Ukrainians meet in their life abroad as emigree. The text discusses the various factors that influenced the formation of the author’s Ukrainian and American identities, which are rooted in her family’s desire for freedom and her nation’s struggle for independence. This personal story also analyzes the deeply rooted and widely used colonial clichés about Ukrainians — “Oh, you are Russian!”— that were prevalent in the United States during Myroslava’s youth, as well as the stereotypes imposed by Russian and Soviet propaganda about Ukrainian antisemitism: “my being Ukrainian aroused suspicion that my family may have contributed to the Holocaust!” (Tomorug Znayenko, 2024, p. 254). The author paints a detailed picture of the lives of Ukrainian immigrants: their origins, education, professional successes and failures, and the cultural centers and academic communities they organized to preserve Ukrainianness in the United States and keep in touch with Ukraine, not only dreaming of restoring independence but also working for it.

The Fourth Part *Photo Gallery: Ukrainians and the World*, compiled by Antonina Berezovento, presents a number of illustrations — visual sources about the professional life and public activities of Ukrainians living outside Ukraine. They were deeply involved in the cultural and political activities of more than 30 countries, and their own lives “for a long time was both a form of preserving Ukrainianness as such and an influential factor in the struggle for

independence of mainland Ukraine” (Berezovenko, 2024, p. 316).

IV. CLEANING GLASSES

The monograph *Living the Independence Dream: Ukraine and Ukrainians in Contemporary Socio-Political Context* is a series of interdisciplinary studies and reflections that embodies the stereoscopy and diversity of views on the course of socio-cultural transformation in Ukraine after the restoration of independence in 1991. This collective volume contains studies that demonstrate the differences between Ukraine and Russia: in worldview and values, in the perception of other cultures and the ability to coexist with them, in the ways of cultural expression, in the ability to create functional mechanisms of self-organization, in the tendency to compete but also to cooperate creatively. Ukrainians want and have been able to coexist on an equal footing with representatives of other ethnic, cultural

and religious communities. Russians, on the contrary, desire dominance by first using force against another community, or, as in the case of Ukraine, both force and deception.

By reading the texts, we trace how Ukrainian intellectuals and the broader masses realized their postcoloniality and, consequently, rejected Russian neo-imperial influence. We can also see how Russia's aggression in 2014 and full-scale invasion in 2022 have sparked intellectual courage and a clearly articulated anti-colonial discourse. Moreover, the application of this discourse to Ukraine is growing in the scholarly works of researchers from other countries. Therefore, this book is an important element in deepening and broadening the understanding of Ukraine in general and its anti-colonial struggle in particular. This is an opportunity to look at Ukraine and Ukrainians not through muddy Russian glasses, but with a decolonizing lens, as we look at the history and culture of other once-enslaved nations. This opportunity is worth taking advantage of.

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Геть російські окуляри – побачити українську мрію

Анотація. Колективна монографія *Living the Independence Dream: Ukraine and Ukrainians in Contemporary Socio-Political Context* проаналізована, використовуючи постколоніальний підхід і підкреслюючи необхідність досліджень, що представляють українців у світі не через посередництво усталених кліше й стереотипів, сформованих у XIX–XXI

століттях, а через розкриття їхнього власного досвіду їхньою власною мовою.

У рецензії акцентована увага, що монографія містить праці українських та зарубіжних науковців, які на основі письмових та візуальних джерел, історичних та літературних наративів, поширених у суспільстві та сформованих у різні епохи поглядах і цінностях, показують особливості українського суспільства, зокрема, відмінності між українцями та росіянами, спростовуючи твердження про «братські народи» або «один народ», що використовуються Росією у війні проти України. Тому ця книга є важливим елементом для поглиблення і розширення розуміння України в цілому та її антиколоніальної боротьби зокрема. Це можливість поглянути на Україну та українців не крізь брудні російські окуляри, а використовуючи деколонізаційну оптику.

Ключові слова: постколоніальний підхід, історичний наратив, деколонізація, деколонізація, національна ідентичність, багатовимірна перспектива.

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